DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 431 923 CE 078 944

AUTHOR	Inglis, Tom; Murphy, Mark
TITLE	No Room for Adults? A Study of Mature Students in University College Dublin.
INSTITUTION	University Coll., Dublin (Ireland).
ISBN	ISBN-0-9535273-0-1
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	122p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Adult Education Office, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland (10 Irish pounds).
PUB TYPE	Numerical/Quantitative Data (110) -- Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC05 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; Access to Education; Administrator Attitudes; Admission (School); *Dropout Characteristics; Educational Attainment; *Educational Attitudes; Educational Policy; Educational Practices; Educationally Disadvantaged; *Enrollment Influences; Foreign Countries; Full Time Students; Higher Education; *Nontraditional Students; *Outcomes of Education; Part Time Students; Student Attitudes; *Student Characteristics; Tables (Data)
IDENTIFIERS	*University College Dublin (Ireland)

ABSTRACT

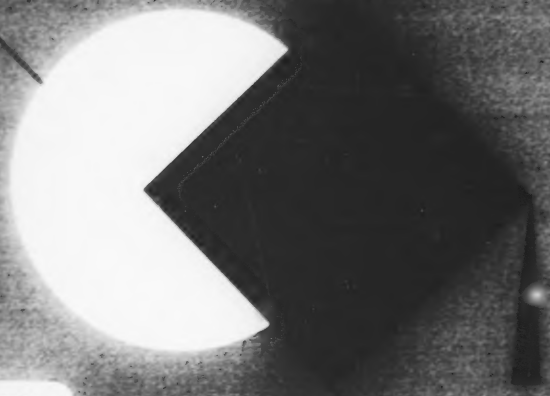
A stratified sample of 554 mature students at University College Dublin (UCD) in Ireland was studied. The sample included 200 unsuccessful applicants, 98 full-time mature students, 95 mature graduates, 100 modular bachelor of arts students, and 61 students who withdrew from UCD. A 50% response rate was achieved. The typical mature student was equally likely to be male or female, over 30 years of age, single, childless, and from an upwardly mobile social background. Most had taken some educational courses since leaving school. Three-fourths of those who completed degrees were female. Compared with their fellow mature students, unsuccessful applicants were younger. Modular degree program students were more likely to be married with children. The modular degree program appeared to be serving as the main access route into second-chance higher education for educationally disadvantaged adults. Most students surveyed enjoyed their courses, academic life, and being a student; however, many were unhappy about the amount of time they had with lecturers, the amount of guidance they received, and general awareness of mature students' special needs at UCD. (Appended is information about Irish universities' institutional relationship with mature students and the study methodology. The report contains 116 references and 33 tables/figures.) (MN)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 431 923

NO ROOM FOR ADULTS?

A STUDY OF [illegible] IN UNIVERSITY [illegible]



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Murphy

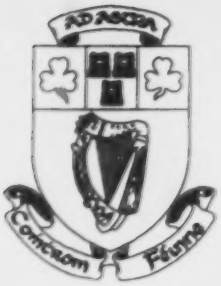
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

Tom Inglis
Mark Murphy

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2



NO ROOM FOR ADULTS?

A STUDY OF MATURE STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

Tom Inglis and Mark Murphy

Social Science Research Centre and the Adult Education Office
University College Dublin
Dublin 4

1999

UCD 3

© Tom Inglis and Mark Murphy

ISBN 0 9535273 0 1

Designed and Printed by Brunswick Press Ltd

Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning,
Government Green Paper on Adult Education, 1998:80.

With a view to increasing access of adult students to third level, it is desirable that universities and other institutions work towards:

- *establishing mature student quotas in disciplines with low mature student representation;*
- *ensuring that the lower socio-economic groups achieve at least a proportionate representation in the allocation of such quotas;*
- *appraising current teaching practices and assessment procedures from an 'adult friendly' perspective;*
- *widening the range of provision, especially through modularisation, workplace delivery, part-time provision, distance education and more open approaches to credit accumulation and transfer;*
- *building in mature student supports through widening the recognition given to routes other than the traditional Leaving Certificate, provision of access courses and tutorial and mentoring systems and off-campus provision;*
- *expanding their distance education provision in a collaborative, cost-effective way.*

Universities Act 1997, section 12(j).

The objectives of a university shall include
'to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education'.

Contents

SECTION		Page
List of Figures and Tables		vi
Acknowledgements		vii
Chapter 1:	Introduction	1
Chapter 2:	Mature Students: National and International Contexts	3
Chapter 3:	Unsuccessful Applicants	13
Chapter 4:	Full-time Mature Students in UCD	31
Chapter 5:	Part-time Mature Students in UCD	43
Chapter 6:	Mature Students who Graduated from UCD	53
Chapter 7:	Mature Students who Withdrew from UCD	65
Chapter 8:	Critical Reflections from Some of the Deans	77
Chapter 9:	Summary of Findings	83
Chapter 10:	Mature Student Policy and Practice in UCD	89
Chapter 11:	Conclusions and Policy Recommendations	95
	Appendices	102
	Appendix A: Irish Universities and Mature Student Admissions	102
	Appendix B: Methodology	105
	References	107

List of Tables and Figures

Tables **Page**

2.1: Demographic characteristics of mature student population 6
2.2: Students in UCD, 1997 8
3.1: Mature Student acceptance rates, 1997 14
3.2: A social profile of unsuccessful applicants 16
3.3: Reasons for applying to UCD: Unsuccessful applicants 17
3.4: Perception of success: Unsuccessful applicants 23
4.1: Number of full-time mature undergraduate students in UCD, 1997 31
4.2: A general profile of full-time mature students in UCD 35
4.3: Most/least enjoyable aspects of college: Full-time students 38
4.4: 1st year exam results: Full-time students 39
5.1: Modular BA Students in UCD, 1996-1997 43
5.2: A social profile of Modular BA students 45
5.3: Most/least enjoyable aspects of college: Modular BA students 47
5.4: 1st year exam results: Modular BA students 48
6.1: Completion/withdrawal rates in UCD, for 1992 class 53
6.2: A social profile of mature graduates 56
6.3: Final exam results: Mature graduates 62
6.4: Present activity: Mature graduates 62
7.1: A social profile of mature students who withdrew 69
7.2: 1st year exam results: Students who withdrew 73
7.3: Reasons for leaving: Students who withdrew 74
9.1: General profile of survey respondents 84

Figures

3.1: Reasons for not applying to Modular BA: Unsuccessful applicants 20
3.2: Perceptions of lack of success: Unsuccessful applicants 25
3.3: Unsuccessful applicants, present course 26
4.1: Main reason for going to college: Full-time students 36
4.2: Satisfaction levels with college: Full-time students 39
5.1: Main reason for going to college: Modular BA students 45
5.2: Satisfaction levels with college: Modular BA students 49
6.1: Main reason for going to college: Mature graduates 57
6.2: Satisfaction levels with course: Mature graduates 59
7.1: Reason for going to college: Mature students who withdrew 69
7.2: Satisfaction levels with college: Mature students who withdrew 71

Acknowledgements

At the launch of the 1998 Government Green Paper *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning*, the Minister of State for Education, Willie O'Dea noted that the Paper recommended that universities and institutes of technology should introduce a system of mature-student quotas. He said that Ireland's performance in this area was 'nothing short of abysmal' (*The Irish Times*, 25 November 1998). We welcome the Minister's comments. Much of what the Green Paper has to say about adult education, lifelong learning and, in particular, mature students, provides the wider context in which this report should be read.

We hope that this report will make a contribution to the debate and discussion that is taking place about the development of adult education in Irish society. There is a new sense of optimism among those involved in adult education. There are signs that the notion of creating and developing lifelong learning is moving from pious aspiration to concrete policy. The Green Paper on adult education noted that a fundamental characteristic of any lifelong learning society is that adults should have free and easy access to third level education, and the opportunity of obtaining the same degrees, diplomas and certificates as students who come directly from school.

Unfortunately, Ireland is not the best place to be for mature students. Our report focuses on University College Dublin. It documents the huge demand and the effort mature students make to get into UCD, and how the College has struggled to meet their needs. We hope that the report adds to the knowledge and understanding of the difficulties faced by adult learners in their struggle to gain access to third level education, and that it might help UCD formulate the vision of itself within the next century.

Like most pieces of social research, this study would not have been possible without the co-operation and assistance of many different people. We would like first to thank all those within the College who helped us along the way. We would especially like to thank Kevin Hurley and everyone else in the Adult Education Office. It was Kevin's commitment to carrying out research as part of the development of adult education within the university, which made the study possible. Of course, the study could not have taken place without the necessary funding provided by the Higher Education Authority. We received considerable support and encouragement from our Research Committee as well as some good criticism. Our research committee were: Dr. John Baker; Professor Pat Clancy, Mr. Kevin Hurley; Dr. Kathleen Lynch; and Dr. Geraldine O'Brien. However, we alone are responsible for the structure and content of the study and this report.

The study centred on a survey of different groups of mature students. This survey could not have taken place without the support of the Registrar, Caroline Hussey, and the Admissions Office. In particular, we are very grateful to Paula Tarrant and Susan Mulkeen who were so generous with their time and resources. The study was conducted within the Social Science Research Centre and we would like to thank Anne Coogan for all her help and the Director, Professor Patrick Clancy. Wearing another of his many hats, Professor Clancy was one of the Deans, along with Professor Fergus D'Arcy and Professor Gerard Doyle, who we interviewed as a part of our study. We thank them for their help and co-operation. We are also grateful to Dr. Ted Fleming for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this report. Finally, but perhaps most important of all, we would like to

thank all those mature students who responded to our questionnaires, and who took part in the different focus group interviews that we organised. This study is for and about them. It is also dedicated to everyone working within the College and in society generally who are committed to fulfilling the dream of society based on the principle of lifelong learning.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This is a study of full-time mature students in University College Dublin. Mature students are generally defined as those over the age of twenty-three years. What makes full-time mature students interesting is that there are so few of them, not just in UCD, but in third level education generally. In 1980, Patrick Clancy (1982:17) found that only 3.6 per cent of all new entrants to full-time higher education were aged over twenty-two years. Six years later he discovered that the proportion over twenty-two years had dropped to 2 per cent (1988:19). In 1992, the proportion had climbed back up to 3 per cent (1995a:42).

The low admission rates to the higher education system was, Clancy said, a form of 'generational inequality' which overlaps with socio-economic inequality. He concluded that mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds constitute an important target population for second chance education (1995a:171). A study of mature students published in 1997 found that they were predominantly middle class, especially lower middle class (Lynch,1997).

The low number of mature students in Irish third level education stands in stark contrast to many other countries, most notably Britain, Germany, Sweden, the United States and Australia. In these countries the proportion of mature students is over 30 per cent, that is ten times more than in Ireland (OECD,1997). The Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995) noted that in such countries, the school age-going population declined at an earlier stage than in Ireland. This led to reduced pressure for places from school leavers. The Committee called for 'a modest progressive increase in the entry rate for mature students, which should accelerate as numbers in the school-leaver cohort begin to level-off or decline' (1995:82). The Committee also noted the inadequate nature of the information about mature students, and recommended that comprehensive data be collected systematically as a basis for policy formulation and implementation (1995:81). The present study is a modest contribution to this project. It adds to the findings of Lynch's study of mature students in Ireland, and to Fleming and Murphy's study of mature students in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (Fleming and Murphy,1997; Lynch,1997).

Mature Students in UCD

Mature students can enter UCD in two different ways. They can, like school leavers, sit the Leaving Certificate examination and obtain the necessary points for the degree course of their choice. Up to a quarter of mature students enter through the CAO points system (Source: UCD Admissions Office). The remaining three-quarters apply for entry on the grounds of mature years. In effect, this means that applicants compete for entry on the basis of prior learning, their contribution to the community, their occupational needs, and so forth. The demand by mature students for entry to UCD is staggering. Each year, up to 1,300 adults apply to be accepted to full-time day degree programmes on the grounds of mature years. Yet less than one hundred are accepted. UCD caters for mature students

through the part-time Bachelor of Arts Modular Degree programme. Each year up to three hundred adults apply to do the Modular BA, and over 80 per cent are accepted. Although we include part-time Modular BA students, this report concentrates on full-time day mature students.

Our objective in this study was to obtain as many facts and as much information as we could about mature students within our limited time and resources. We decided that it was important to move beyond the type of survey data obtained by Lynch and Clancy in their studies, and to develop an understanding of the educational experiences and struggles of mature students. We wanted mature students to tell their own stories. What kind of people try to become mature students in UCD? What do they do to improve their chances of being accepted? What kind of social, educational and occupational backgrounds do they have? What is it like to be a mature student in UCD? How do they survive?

This Study

We decided that there were different groups of mature students that we needed to survey and talk to. First there were those who were unsuccessful in their applications. Second, there were those who were currently undergraduate students. We felt it was important to compare and contrast the background and experiences of full-time day students with part-time evening students, so we surveyed and talked to people in the Modular BA degree programme. We also surveyed and talked to mature students who had graduated from the College. Finally, we managed to trace and make contact with a small sample of students who had withdrawn from college before completing their degrees.

Since we did not have direct access to names and addresses, which are treated as confidential, we had to rely on the good graces of the UCD Admissions Office to help us select the samples and post our questionnaires. Each questionnaire was accompanied with a covering letter explaining the background to, and purpose of our study. We had to do this twice to improve our response rate which finally came to just over 50 per cent. This is considered well above average for a survey using a postal questionnaire, especially since we did not have direct access to the names and addresses of those sampled. The response was higher from current students and graduates, and lower from those whose applications were unsuccessful and who had withdrawn from College. We asked respondents if they would be willing to take part in a focus group discussion. We then took a sample of up to ten people from the different groups and brought them together for a two-hour discussion either in UCD or in a hotel in Dublin. Finally, we held interviews with the Deans of the Faculties of Arts, Philosophy and Sociology, and Science.

Chapter 2

Mature Students in Higher Education: National and International Contexts

Increased levels of participation in higher education have been one of the most important changes in education in Western society in recent decades. In the United States and Europe, enrolments have increased steadily since the 1960s (NUCEA,1996:10). Between 1960 and 1980 student enrolments in European higher education tripled (Coffield and Williamson,1997: 5-6). Britain and Ireland have also taken part in this social transformation (Parry,1997; Clancy,1994).

A major aspect of this transformation of higher education — everywhere else but the Republic of Ireland — has been an increase in the participation of adults, or mature students. In America, there has been a large influx of non-traditional (mature) students since the 1960s.

> ***The most striking difference in American higher education in the 1990s, compared to the 1960s, is that in many undergraduate institutions, the average student is a woman, older than 22, working and perhaps supporting her own family, and possibly attending classes only on a part-time basis; in short, the average undergraduate is a 'non-traditional' student (Baker and Velez, 1996:82).***

In fact, official statistics put the number of non-traditional students in undergraduate colleges (community colleges and universities) at over 50 per cent of the total student body (U.S. Department of Education,1994). Within the American system, this would include both part-time and full-time students. This influx means more Americans have obtained a college education than ever before. In 1970, 12 million Americans had a college degree. By 1995, this figure had tripled to 36 million (NUCEA,1996:7).

Similar changes have occurred in Britain. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of mature students enrolled on undergraduate programmes increased by 77 per cent (Department of Education and Science,1992). According to McGivney (1996:7) almost 40 per cent of enrolments in full-time higher education are now mature. This is a four-fold increase in the number of full-time mature students since the early 1980s (Lynch,1996:28). The number of part-time mature students in British higher education has also increased (McGivney,1996:7).

The growth in the proportion of mature students in Britain has, according to Parry (1997:15), been 'spectacular'.

> ***In the space of 5 years between 1990 and 1994, the numbers of mature first year students on first-degree courses nearly doubled while those for young people grew by a third. More dramatic again has been the growth in the number and percentage of mature students in full-time programmes at this level: An increase of 115 per cent over this period.***

The university sector, in particular, has witnessed a growth in mature student enrolments. As Parry points out, growth has been greater in the former polytechnics.

> ***Among the university establishments in England, most admit between 10 per cent and 30 per cent of mature students in full-time courses at this level. Those in the upper half of this band are mainly universities designated after 1992 and nearly all of those in the lower half are universities established before this date (1997:15).***

One of the major factors underpinning the growth in mature student enrolments is the development since the early 1980s of the 'Access' movement. What initially began as a small exercise in promoting access among non-traditional students in London, progressed to a stage where by 1990 over 500 access courses across Britain are nationally recognised as routes into higher education institutions (Tuckett,1990:123). The 1987 White Paper on Education provided status to these courses as an approved route alongside A levels and vocational qualifications (Melling and Stanton,1990:134).

In the beginning, the Access movement lobbied for wider provision for adults within the British higher education system. The focus of the debate then shifted to issues of inequality and disadvantage (NIACE,1993; Coffield and Williamson,1997; Williams,1997; Preece,1998). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, attention moved towards looking at issues of accessibility (Fulton,1989; Parry and Wake,1990; Schuller,1991; Duke,1997). It became evident that while **access** — getting adults into higher education, was one issue, **accessibility** — keeping them there, was another. Wright (1989:99) expands on this distinction between access and accessibility.

> *ACCESS*
> ***The first approach tends to dwell on mechanisms for access – in doing so, this approach concerns itself first and foremost with such issues as the provision of special access courses, the encouragement of more flexible admissions policies, and the recognition of prior learning, whether or not certified... .***
>
> *ACCESSIBILITY*
> ***The second type of approach, while also concerned with making easier the entry into higher education of potential students from 'non-traditional' backgrounds aims, above all else, at increasing the general accessibility of the higher education system as a whole, at identifying, and overcoming the multifarious factors which make it remote, or unattractive, to the majority of the English population.***

Those involved in the Access movement often see higher education generally, and universities in particular, as maintaining rather than reducing, social inequality. Universities, it is argued, function to stifle and inhibit the participation of adults, particularly working-class adults. The accessibility movement is founded on the principle of making the university more 'adult' friendly (NIACE,1993). It leaves British universities in an unfavourable position, not just with adult education interest groups, but in relation to government policy, most noticeably the Dearing Report (1997). Coffield and Williamson (1997:6) explain the challenge that faces universities.

> ***Universities carry the history of this social exclusivity like a dead weight and a constant reproach. It defines the central policy dilemma they have struggled with: the need to expand student numbers without loss to the quality of their teaching and research. And it has limited their capacity to adapt their curricula and their research to respond to new kinds of students and to government pressures to widen their role in relation to both public services and private industry.***

This confrontation with institutions of higher education can be viewed as only a part of a much wider global challenge: to promote and implement the concept of lifelong learning, and to develop learning societies. 1996 was designated the European Year of Lifelong Learning. The European Commission is keen to promote the notion that education does not stop at a certain age (European Commission,1995). The concept of lifelong learning has gained currency since the 1970s. Transformations in the world of work and technology are a challenge to the traditional models of education and the knowledge bases associated with them. Organisations such as UNESCO (Skager,1978; Cropley,1979) and the Council of Europe (1970) have recognised the importance of research and debate in this area.

One issue in this debate centres on the need for institutions to transform themselves in order to meet the ever-increasing demand and need for education. As Cropley (1979:12) put it, there is a need 'to develop educational systems which more closely reflect the values and attitudes of the whole society, rather than those of narrow interest groups.'

More recently, the OECD (1995) has taken part in this debate, recognising the crucial role now played by education in society. In particular, it views education for adults as an essential ingredient for both economic and social development, particularly in an 'information society'.

> ***The most important development is the central role now played by knowledge and information in every aspect of social and economic life, under the influence of new computer and communications technologies (OECD,1995:7).***

So, in summary, there are two major issues in the debate about mature students and the creation of a learning society which educators in Ireland need to address. The first is the necessity to increase the proportion of mature students participating in higher education, and the second is for institutions of higher education to undergo a transformation to make themselves more adult friendly and facilitate lifelong learning.

The Irish Situation

Ireland, along with other Western societies, experienced a rapid increase in third-level enrolments since the 1960s. The period 1970-1990 in Ireland was one of the fastest rates of expansion in enrolments in Europe (Clancy,1994). This has been particularly true for the extra-university sector which witnessed the bulk of this increase.

Lynch (1997) carried out a comprehensive study on mature students in higher education. Defining a mature student as aged 23 or over on year of entry, she found that in 1993-94 there were 6,667 mature students enrolled in higher education. Of these, 1,699 (25 per cent) were full-time students. The majority, three-quarters (4968), were part-time.

Mature students account for only 5 per cent of full-time students in Irish higher education. This is well below the average in Western society, particularly compared to Britain and the United States. Given the lack of full-time opportunities, it is not surprising that mature students comprise 85 per cent of those enrolled part-time in higher education.

In comparison with Britain, then, the proportion of mature enrolments in Irish higher education, particularly in full-time undergraduate programmes, is low. As Lynch (1996:28) pointed out, mature students in British third level institutions are over five times better represented than those in Ireland.

The findings from Lynch's study are summarised below. (See Table 2.1) Several issues are of interest here. First, the majority (65 per cent) of mature students were enrolled in the extra-university sector, and were studying part-time (75 per cent). Second, the majority of mature entrants tended to come from lower-middle class backgrounds.

Table. 2.1: Demographic characteristics of mature student population

	Characteristics
Enrolments	There were 6,667 mature students registered for higher education courses in 1993/94. 25 per cent of these were full-time, and 75 per cent were part-time. Mature students constituted 85 per cent of part-time students in higher education, but only 5 per cent of full-time students.
Institution Attended	Thirty-five per cent of mature students were enrolled in the universities, while 65 per cent were enrolled in the extra-university sector (DITs, RTCs, Colleges of Education).
Socio-economic status	Mature students generally come from lower middle-class backgrounds. Only 22 per cent of all mature entrants come from the four lowest socio-economic groups (lower non-manual to unskilled manual). Lynch's evidence suggests that the previous working life of mature students was more likely to be one of unstable and relatively low-wage employment.
General Profile	Using other data collected on surveys, Lynch provides a general profile of mature students in higher education. They tend to be young, lower-middle class, studying outside the university sector, on part-time courses, and more likely to have come to higher education to improve career prospects.

(adapted from Lynch 1997).

The low level of admission of mature students and, especially, the absence of students from lower socio-economic groups, have featured in recent studies (Egan,1994; HEA,1995). Morris's report in 1997 detailed the general demographics of the mature student population, and made some policy recommendations (Morris, 1997). The report was produced for a conference organised by the Higher Education Authority on mature students in higher education. The report of the Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education (1995:139) proposed that the proportion of mature students of new full-time entrants should be increased to 20 per cent by the year 2015. Other reports have detailed the experiences of mature students while at college (Martin and O'Neill,1996; Fleming and Murphy,1997; Healey,1998). Following earlier work in this area (Morrissey,1990; Cochrane,1991), we now have a significant body of knowledge about an important area of Irish higher education.

Issues of inequality and disadvantage are common factors in all these studies and reports. The Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education was emphatic about the need to overcome disadvantage.

> ***[M]ature students from disadvantaged backgrounds deserve to be given access to higher education both because of the disadvantages which they experienced as school leavers, and because of their on-going relative disadvantages vis-à-vis other adults (1995:139).***

Clancy also made a connection between 'socio-economic and age disparities' in higher education. One way to address these disparities is through second chance education. Clancy echoed many of the recommendations of other reports when he stated that second-chance education 'must not be seen as a luxury which we can attend to when the demographic pressure has passed at the end of this decade. Social justice and economic considerations dictate that it be seen as a current priority' (1995b:115).

New policies regarding mature students and higher education began to be developed in the 1990s. The Programme for Economic and Social Progress (PESP) report in 1991 stressed the need to increase participation rates of mature students in higher education. Both the Government's Green and White Papers on education (Department of Education,1992:1995) emphasised the importance of achieving greater equality in education and viewed lifelong learning within higher education as a stimulus to achieving this.

Possibly, the most significant government intervention in this debate was the Universities Act of 1997. It stated that one of the nine objects of the university was 'to facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education.' The universities, however, have been slow to change in this regard. One of the major reasons for this is the high demand among school leavers for higher education. The result, according to Clancy (1996:368), is that 'higher education policy has primarily been directed at meeting this need to the neglect of the demand from mature students.'

The Irish university sector and mature students: There are eight universities in the Republic of Ireland, each of which has its own admissions procedure and mature student entry requirements (See Appendix A). Within the universities different faculties, and in some cases different departments, have their own specific requirements for mature student entry. For instance, in University College Galway, the Faculty of Arts reserves up to 70 places for mature students, while the Faculty of Medicine only accepts a limited number of mature applicants.

The overall level of enrolment of mature students in Irish universities is 5 per cent. This, as we have seen, is far lower than in Britain or the United States. Most Irish universities operate on a quota system. Dublin City University, for example, reserves between 5 and 10 per cent of places for mature students on many of its courses. Both the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD), award approximately 10 per cent of their places to mature applicants. Quotas also exist for many of the courses in University Colleges Cork (UCC) and Galway (UCG).

In terms of admissions procedure, most universities look for some evidence of ability to pursue and benefit from the proposed degree programme. Generally, previous education qualifications are an advantage, but for most courses the Leaving Certificate is not specifically necessary. Some courses, such as Science in UCG, look for specific qualifications in certain subjects such as Mathematics or a science subject. Nearly all universities and degree programmes within them select mature candidates on the basis of an interview and/or assessment test. For instance, Trinity College requires all mature applicants to sit a test. Successful candidates are then called for interview.

The Present Study: Mature Students in University College Dublin

The present study focuses on mature students on full-time undergraduate degree programmes in University College Dublin (UCD). Established in 1851, and based in Belfield on the South side of Dublin, UCD has the largest number of students of any Irish university (17,105 in 1997 of which 14,419 were full-time). (See Table 2.2)

Table 2.2: Students in UCD by course, 1997		
Course	**Full-time**	**Part-time**
Undergraduate Degree	11,276	857
Undergraduate Diploma	43	388
Postgraduate Degree	2,230	815
Postgraduate Diploma	796	182
Other	—	228
Unknown	—	216
Total	**14,419**	**2,686**

The College defines a mature student as someone,

(a) who is over 23 years of age on the 1st January of the proposed year of entry;

(b) whose school-leaving qualifications are insufficient for admission in the normal way (Leaving Certificate points);

(c) who is resident in an EU member state.

There are currently 142 full-time mature students registered on undergraduate degree programmes in UCD. This represents 1.2 per cent of the total full-time undergraduate student population. UCD, then, has one of the lowest intakes of full-time mature students in the university sector.

Unlike other Irish universities, UCD does not have a specific college policy on mature students, particularly in relation to the number of students it admits on the grounds of mature years. It does not have a formal quota system in place. It is left to each individual Faculty to formulate a policy for non-traditional entrants on the grounds of mature years, and how to assess applicants' ability, interest, commitment and motivation. The Arts Faculty, for instance, has an informal quota of 30 places each year for mature students. Given that nearly 600 people apply to the full-time day BA degree each year, this means that only 5 per cent, or one in twenty, are admitted. The quota of places offered is rarely filled. Sometimes less than half of those accepted, take up the places offered to them. Even if the quota were filled each year in Arts, mature student enrolments would only be 2.2 per cent of the total full-time student intake (1,337 in 1997).

In the Arts Faculty, mature student policy and procedures for admission are implemented by the Dean and his advisors. They examine the CAO forms from mature applicants and decide who will be offered a place. This is also the system in the Faculty of Science, although here the Dean shortlists strong candidates for interview. The Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology has a committee that assesses mature applications for entry to the degree in Social Science. It also has an informal quota of 15 places which is 10 per cent of the 150 places on offer. This is four times higher than the proportion of mature students admitted to Arts. The Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology has also recently introduced a reserve list. In the Faculty of Arts, as in the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, candidates are assessed solely on the basis of their application form. Law, Science and Engineering conduct interviews with prospective mature students. Applications on the grounds of mature years are not considered for Medicine, Physiotherapy, Radiography and Veterinary Medicine.

Across Faculties, mature students are encouraged to meet the normal entry requirements — that is to achieve the necessary number of CAO points from the Leaving Certificate and to have the specific subjects necessary for the degree course they wish to follow (matriculation subjects). The College's information booklet 'Application on Grounds of Mature Years,

1998/1999,' advises that applicants of a mature age should not rely on special consideration on mature years.

> ***This privilege is granted only in a limited number of exceptional cases and there is no guarantee that any application will be successful. Any matriculated applicant over 23 years of age who is not awarded a special place will be considered on the basis of school-leaving results in competition with other applicants.***

The Faculty of Arts is unique in that it offers a specific degree course for mature students. The Modular BA programme was established in 1992. It replaced the Evening Degree that had operated successfully for many years. The main impetus for the change to a Modular programme came from the decline in demand for evening degrees from National school teachers, who comprised a large proportion of the evening student population. The Modular BA was designed specifically for adults who wish to avail of the opportunity of gaining an Arts degree on a more flexible basis. In 1997, there were 684 students registered on the Modular programme. The course takes place in the evenings and is structured around course modules. Students accumulate credits for each course they take. Once they have accumulated sufficient credits they are awarded a degree. A module is a year's course in a subject. Once a module is completed, students are awarded 30 credits. In order to complete the requirements necessary to be awarded the BA Modular degree, students must complete a minimum of 4 year's registration and accumulate 240 credits. A 2-subject 4-year programme is a completion route taken by many students. However the course is flexible enough to allow students to complete the course at their own pace.

UCD also caters for adult learners in other ways. The university has a wide range of adult and continuing education courses specifically orientated towards adults who wish to return to learning, enhance their current skills, or undertake study towards a higher degree.

Adult education (extra mural) provision in UCD: Adult education courses are a major feature of UCD's provision for mature students. The College has a long tradition in what used to be called extra-mural provision. The first course was developed in the late 1940s with the establishment of the Extra-Mural Studies Board. UCD now offers the largest adult education programme in Ireland. In 1997, there were over 200 courses available. At present, there are approximately 5,000 adults participating in courses ranging from *Introduction to Psychology* to courses in business management and computer skills. The courses are generally non-accredited and usually last for one academic term. The courses are mainly held on campus. The adult education programme is self-financing, with course fees in 1997 ranging from £25 to £685.

More recently the Adult Education Office has introduced a number of accredited programmes which lead to the award of a College certificate or diploma.

Access, Outreach and Community Education: The Adult Education Office offers a Return to Learning course. The course provides participants with the opportunity to engage in academically oriented study. The course is for one year, and gives participants experience of third level assessment by essays and exams. The Adult Education Office charges £190 for the course. Some 20 free places are available through sponsorship from the Educational Building Society (EBS). This is not a certified course, and there is no formal credit awarded. Nor is it a formal access course. In other words, participants who complete the course successfully are not guaranteed a mature student place. Nor does it mean that they receive any preference when it comes to the assessment of applications.

Although it has been involved in the field of adult education over a long number of years, UCD's tradition for outreach and community-based activities was allowed to lapse in the 1980s. While the dominant pattern is still one of attendance at the College, there have been some noteworthy initiatives. One example is the Community University Project established on Dublin's Northside as a partnership between the Adult Education Office and a local women's project. In recent years there has been a more concerted effort to revive the tradition of community and outreach programmes. These have included the broadcasting of short courses on Cable Television, a project to harness the Internet for adult learners, direct delivery of courses at Merchant's Quay and the S.A.O.L. Drugs Projects, collaboration with Southside Partnership to launch and consolidate the Local Development Training Institute, and with the Dublin Adult Learning Centre in the development of an Internet-based course on computers.

Continuing Professional Development: Continuing professional development is well catered for in UCD. The main source of provision is the University Industry Programme (UIP). Continuing education briefly came under the umbrella of the Adult Education Office. However, in the early 1990s it was decided that adult education and continuing education had contrasting social and economic objectives. This is reflected in the type of courses on offer in the UIP. These courses cater mainly for professionals working in specialised fields. In 1997, there were five courses with a student population of just under 1,000. Courses are organised on a part-time basis and last from several months to two years. The courses are certified, with either a Diploma or Certificate being offered, depending on the duration of the course and level of assessment.

One example of a UIP programme is the Diploma in Safety, Health and Welfare at Work. This is a two-year part-time course designed to help students understand what is necessary to meet the requirements of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act (1989). There are eight modules, for example Occupational Hygiene, each with 36 hours of lectures. On satisfactory completion, students receive a UCD Diploma. Exams are held for each module. The course can gain students entry to the MAPPLSC (Masters in Applied Science) course in the Faculty of Science.

Separate from the University Industry Programme, there are many other continuing education courses run by various faculties and departments. The Faculty of Veterinary Medicine publishes a separate booklet for its continuing education programmes. These include, for example, courses on Bull Fertility and Calf Diseases. The Faculty of Medicine offers courses in Aviation Medicine, Advanced Cardiac Life Support and Advanced Paediatric Life Support. Many of these courses are over one or two days or a weekend. The Faculty of Agriculture offers an NUI Diploma in Rural Development, which is a distance education programme run in partnership with the other NUI universities in Cork, Galway and Maynooth. Another course offered through distance learning is the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS) in Trade Union and Business Studies. This degree, which began in 1996, is a joint initiative of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Department of Industrial Relations in UCD.

There are also continuing education courses offered to staff of the university. They are run either by the College or the Irish Universities Training Network (IUTN). Courses include Negotiating Skills, Organisational Change and Teaching Skills. The majority of such courses are conducted over one or two days.

Part-time Degree Programmes: Apart from the Modular BA, there are other opportunities for adults to gain degrees on a part-time basis. These courses tend to be directed towards professionals in a specific field, for example the MLIS (Masters in Library and Information

Studies), which is a part-time course run for librarians. The Graduate School of Business offers a variety of higher part-time degrees, such as the MBA in Business Administration and MBA in Health Services Management.

Conclusion

In general, UCD has a wide range of courses for adults who want to learn on a part-time basis. This provision, however, is in stark contrast to that made for mature students on full-time day degrees. Moreover, existing provision tends to serve the academic and vocational needs of the middle and upper middle classes. The Adult Education Programme attempts to widen access to disadvantaged people through strategies such as sponsorship and discounts, but finds it difficult to sustain this because it has to operate its programme on a strictly self-financing basis. This constraint may ease under the Universities Act 1997, which will enable the Programme to be more pro-active in countering disadvantage. But, for the moment, its audience, like that of the part-time degrees and the University Industry Programme, is largely drawn from those who already have had wider access to educational opportunities. UCD is only beginning to develop its programme and widen its remit to cater for socially or economically disadvantaged people in Irish society. A major initiative in this regard was the establishment of the New Era Programme which enables pupils from certain disadvantaged schools to enter the university with less points than is required through the CAO system, and to give them additional support while at college. In general, however, the lifelong learning on offer to adults is only extended to those who can afford it. In short, it could be said that the adult and continuing education programme in the university is designed to meet the needs of middle class professionals, while the full-time day degree programme meets the needs of their children.

This report is concerned with access and accessibility for adults in degree programmes at UCD. This relates to access and accessibility in Irish higher education generally, in particular for minority groups. Who gets into college raises fundamental questions about social equality (Clancy,1988;1995a). It raises questions of access to power, status and privilege. It is pleasant and quaint to think of mature students as pursuing education as an end in itself — knowledge for knowledge's sake. But for many, third-level education functions as a gateway to a good job, an adequate income, and a position of authority and respect. We live in a 'credential' society; the more qualifications you achieve the more powerful you become. Access to higher education by members of minority groups, particularly those who are disadvantaged, can play a positive role in promoting and achieving social equality. The promise is that, regardless of class, gender or age, if you study and work hard enough, you will be able to attain a place in third level education.

In reality, this promise is not being fulfilled. When compared to young people from higher professional classes, participation in third level education, particularly universities, by people from lower socio-economic groups is minimal (Clancy,1995a). While the situation has changed somewhat over the last fifteen years, UCD, like most other universities, is still a predominantly middle-class institution, serving children of the middle and upper social classes, and providing them with access to the same power and status their parents enjoy.

As we saw earlier, there is some motivation to make changes in the system for the benefit of mature students. But what has been missing in many reports, and what is crucial in formulating new policies, is an account of the needs and interests of the mature students, particularly those who are still struggling to get into college.

One of the objectives of this report is to discover how UCD can meet the needs of these underrepresented groups. We wanted to provide a forum for mature student voices; to allow them to tell their own stories about how it looks, so to speak, from the other side of the educational fence. The following five chapters detail the findings of our research on five different categories of mature student. In each of the chapters, issues of access and accessibility are highlighted and examined in the hope that they can shed light on the difficulties faced by mature learners, and the kind of appropriate responses UCD can develop in order to address adequately questions of access and accessibility.

Chapter 3

Unsuccessful Applicants

Each year, for the past six years, well over one thousand people apply to be accepted as mature students in UCD. Less than one hundred are accepted. Some people apply year after year. They take courses to improve their chances. Rejection does not deter them. They know their chances are slim, but they are determined to pursue their goal of getting into college. In this chapter we try to find out something about those adult learners whose applications have been turned down. Who are they? Why did they apply? How were their applications processed? What is the experience of mature adults trying unsuccessfully to access the elite field of the academy? These are some questions that form the basis of this chapter. They are questions that we feel should be on the minds of everyone thinking about the future of UCD.

One of the main indicators of an organisation's success in the educational market is the level of demand for its courses. We know that there is a huge demand by mature students to gain entry to third level education. We also know that there is a huge demand to enter UCD. In 1997, UCD received 1,347 applications from adults who wished to enter full-time degree courses on the basis of mature years. (See Table 3.1) Most mature students are attracted to courses in the Humanities. An Arts degree was the most popular choice with 544 applications — 40 per cent of the total. The number of Arts and Social Science applications is 804, or 60 per cent of the total. However, it must be noted that there is an element of double counting. For example, many of those who apply to Social Science would have applied to Arts and perhaps other degree programmes as well. There would also appear to be some misunderstanding by applicants — or perhaps lack of communication by the College — about the courses to which mature students can apply. For example, in 1997 there were 97 applications for Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, even though they do not allow entry on the basis of mature years.

Number offered places: In some respects the success of any commercial enterprise can be assessed by the level of demand for its products. On this basis, UCD is enormously successful. There is a huge demand by mature students for its degree courses. If the success of a commercial enterprise is assessed by its ability to meet the demand for its products, UCD, as an educational enterprise, could be deemed to be failing. In 1997, only 81 people, or 6 per cent of the 1,347 applications, were offered places. The most fundamental question for UCD, the Higher Education Authority, or indeed anyone involved in educational planning or policy, is what can be done to meet this demand.

Individual Faculties have different levels of acceptance. Over half (55 per cent) of the mature student applicants to Agriculture were accepted. This compares with, for example, only 2 per cent in Law.

Table 3.1: Mature Acceptance Rates by Faculty, 1997			
Faculty	**Number of Applications**	**Number of Offers**	**Acceptance Rate (%)**
Veterinary Medicine	13	0	0
Medicine	84	1	1*
Law	81	2	2
Commerce	169	5	3
Science	102	5	5
Arts (Incl. Music)	544	30	6
Social Science	261	17	7
Engineering/Architecture	64	5	8
Agriculture	29	16	55
Total	**1347**	**81**	**N/A**

*(Source: UCD Admissions Office) *Had sufficient points*

Places offered to mature students: In 1996 there were 3,366 places on offer to all prospective undergraduate students, entering on the basis of Leaving Certificate points, or mature years. This was the total number of undergraduate places available in the College. Only 100, that is 3 per cent, of these places were offered to mature applicants. This is lower than the national average of 5 per cent. This might suggest that, in comparison with other universities, mature students are not a priority for UCD. However, it must be remembered that in comparison with other universities UCD does have a Modular BA programme specifically designed for mature students. If the 250 entrants to the Modular BA in 1997 are included, the proportion of places offered to mature applicants is 9 per cent.

The Modular BA programme: The Modular BA degree is orientated specifically to the mature student. It is, so to speak, UCD's main method of meeting the demand by mature students. It is an evening degree programme. There were 298 applicants to the Modular BA in 1997. Of these 250, or 84 per cent, were offered places.

But while the Modular BA programme may be seen to be UCD's solution to catering for mature students, it does not appear to be a solution favoured by the mature students themselves. The number of applications to the Modular BA programme is only one third of the number who applied to do Arts and Social Science degrees as full-time day students. The message from UCD is, then, quite clear. With some exceptions, the College is not willing or able to cater for the demand made by adult learners, unless they are willing to study part-time, at night, and for a Bachelor of Arts degree.

Previous Research

There has been little study done on the background of unsuccessful applicants and their experiences. In Britain, Smithers and Griffin (1986) carried out a study of adult learners who applied to five universities through the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) for entry on the grounds of mature years. They compared successful with unsuccessful applicants. They found that unsuccessful applicants were more likely to be:

- Male
- Young, with most in their twenties
- Single with no children
- From lower social class backgrounds
- Not educationally well qualified (1986:62).

Unsuccessful applicants had various explanations and rationalisations for being rejected (1986:93). Some blamed the lack of university places, others a lack of counselling. Whatever the reason for being rejected, there was general disappointment in the way applications were handled.

> ***Most of the applicants said they would have liked to have been given the reason for their rejection, and most would have welcomed counselling about other opportunities and courses... . Most of the interviewees, quite unprompted, volunteered their disappointment at the standard rejection letter. They expressed their feelings of inadequacy at being turned down without explanation (Smithers and Griffin,1986:93).***

However, rejection and the consequent feelings of inadequacy, did not inhibit those who were unsuccessful in their attempts to enter higher education. Half of those who were initially rejected, eventually secured places on degree courses elsewhere (1986:97). This led Smithers and Griffin to conclude that 'the academic success elsewhere of those not admitted by the JMB entrance procedures suggests that their methods should perhaps be looked at again' (1986:98). In this respect, it would be interesting to follow the academic path of adult learners not accepted by UCD to see if, when and where they were successful in gaining entry to another college.

There are a number of practical difficulties faced by applicants when attempting to gain entry to third level education. Walters (1997:22) has outlined some of the difficulties faced by Irish applicants:

- Making informed decisions about the institutions to which they should apply.
- Selecting the course and subjects most suitable to their needs, interests and capabilities.
- Deciding whether to take a full-time, part-time or open-learning course.
- Filling in the Central Admissions Office (CAO) form.
- Preparing for, and successfully completing, an interview.

As Walters points out, all these stages of the application process are crucial in determining whether or not a student obtains a place, and whether a place gained is on a suitable course. But there is a common factor to each stage. The chances of successfully negotiating each stage can be linked to the provision of a proper educational guidance and counselling service for adults. While such a service is readily available to most second-level students contemplating entering third level, there is no readily identifiable service for mature students. The absence of a proper educational and guidance counselling service for adults is well recognised as a major failure of Irish adult education provision (Bassett et al,1989:94-96).

The Experience of Unsuccessful Applicants

As we have seen, the main barrier facing mature students trying to gain access to UCD is the low level of acceptance. Only one applicant in seventeen (6 per cent) who applied in 1997 was accepted. But we have seen from other studies that there are also social barriers that prevent certain applicants being accepted. Applicants from working-class backgrounds, especially those without any prior experience of higher education, are less likely to gain entry. Another barrier is access to information, guidance and counselling regarding the application process. It may well be that it is those people who have been able to attend pre-university courses, who have had access to private guidance and counselling, who have

contacts within the university, and who have had the time, resources and social skills to come to the university and make contact with staff, who succeed in being accepted.

We felt that it was an important part of our study to gain some information about the large number of adult learners who are unsuccessful in their applications to UCD. We had difficulty gaining access to their names and addresses and, then, persuading them to take part. To protect confidentiality, the Admissions Office in UCD took a random sample of 200 names from the list of unsuccessful applicants in 1997 and agreed to post them a small questionnaire and a letter of introduction from us explaining the background, method and purpose of the study. We received 74 completed questionnaires, giving an overall response rate of 37 per cent. We believe this to be adequate given the low level of response to postal questionnaires in general and that, so to speak, the unsuccessful applicants owed UCD nothing, and may have been resentful at having had their applications rejected.

The majority of our respondents were single (70 per cent), more than half (56 per cent) were under thirty years old; over two-thirds (68 per cent) had no children. Slightly more than half (55 per cent) were male. (See Table 3.2) Unsuccessful applicants resemble the characteristics of mature applicants in Smithers and Griffin's study, particularly in terms of age, gender, marital status and number of children.

Seven in ten of our respondents had completed the Leaving Certificate; of these only 17 per cent had failed. Nearly half (48 percent) achieved two or more honours and had fulfilled third level matriculation requirements, that is, had obtained at least 2 honours in subjects in which they had taken honours papers and had passed 4 other subjects, including Maths, English and Irish.

Two-thirds of the unsuccessful applicants had taken part in education and training courses since they had finished their initial education. The majority of these (61 per cent) had taken courses in further education, designed to prepare people for the world of work, for example secretarial, computer and business skills courses. Five respondents had taken extra-mural courses, while two had been to Nursing School. Eleven respondents had previous experience of higher education, and had studied for degrees, diplomas and certificates.

Unsuccessful applicants tended to come from working and lower middle class backgrounds whose parents had low levels of education. Half of our respondents had parents who occupied positions in the three lowest socio-economic categories – clerical non-manual, skilled and unskilled manual occupations. Two-thirds of our respondents had parents who did not finish secondary school. Only 10 respondents had parents who went on to complete a third level course.

Table 3.2: A Social Profile of Unsuccessful Applicants

Characteristics	Per cent
General:	
Male	55%
Under 30 years	56%
Single	70%
No children	68%
Education:	
Leaving Certificate	71%
Further Education Qualifications	66%
Socio-economic status:	
Works in manual/service type jobs	65%

When we examine the occupational status of the unsuccessful applicants themselves, we find that most (65 per cent) have held low-wage, low-status positions. Only 18 percent were in permanent, full-time employment working, for example, as a barman, hairdresser, bank official and clerical worker.

This would suggest that a large proportion, if not the majority of adult learners who apply to UCD are educationally qualified to take part in and successfully complete their chosen degree programmes. What prevents them from doing so is that there are other applicants who are better qualified. In effect, this is a mirror image of what happens to those who apply on the basis of points obtained in the Leaving Certificate. It is not that students with, for example, 380 points are not suited to or capable of studying Medicine. It is just that they are not as well qualified, at least in terms of CAO points. It is clear for those who try to enter on the basis of Leaving Certificate results how many points are necessary to gain entry to a particular degree programme. However, there is no clear indication as to what qualifications are necessary, for those who apply on the basis of mature years.

Applying to UCD

Mature students generally have more commitments and responsibilities than school-leavers. Applying to study for a degree at university indicates a willingness to make sacrifices. Studying for a degree takes at least three years, and involves a considerable amount of time and effort. There is no guarantee that the degree will lead to a better standard of living, improved social standing, or even a sense of self-fulfilment. So what is the attraction? There were several reasons given, but improving job prospects did not rank high among them. (See Table 3.3)

Most of our unsuccessful applicants said they were mainly attracted to third-level education simply because they wanted to learn, or get a degree. This is similar to the findings of previous studies (Fleming and Murphy,1997; Lynch,1997). But we asked our respondents why they applied specifically to UCD. One in ten said it was because UCD was near their home. Three in ten said it was the programme and subjects on offer that attracted them.

Table 3.3: Reasons for applying to UCD, unsuccessful applicants

Reason	Number	Per Cent
Good programme/subjects	20	30%
Learning/Fulfilment	13	19%
Improve job prospects	12	18%
Wanted Degree	9	13%
Near Home	7	10%
Other	7	10%
Total	**68**	**100**

Missing = 6

As part of our study we invited a number of our respondents to take part in a focus group interview. Focus group interviews are formally structured discussions on a specific issue about which participants have some knowledge or experience (Morgan,1988). We wanted to discuss respondents' attitudes to returning to learning as mature students and, specifically, their experiences of applying to UCD. Ten of the respondents who took part in our survey participated in the focus group interview. The names used in our report are fictitious.

What emerged from our discussion was that applying to college was by no means a spur of the moment decision. Most of the participants had been building up to it for several years. Applying to college was a major decision in their lives. Some regretted that they could not

do it earlier, others just did not consider it as an option for them. Joan, for example, is 53 years old and married with three children. Going to college for her was *'something I've always longed to have, always aimed, always dreamt of having ... .'* She could not attend secondary school because her family could not afford to send her. She remembered clearly what happened nearly 40 years ago.

> ***Well when I was 14 in school, the teachers sent for my mother because there was some kind of scholarship available for secondary school. But my mother couldn't even afford to pay for the books... . I couldn't take the scholarship up, because books had to be paid for, and the money I was going to earn was going. I was the oldest in the family; it was going to be important. ... although I had very good parents, I hadn't got the opportunity to go. I would have gone to secondary school, if I had a choice.***

Louise, 47 years, is another woman who found her wish to continue her education curtailed at an early age. Although her family was reasonably well-off, she could not continue because of a family bereavement.

> ***I left school and joined [company] directly at the age of 19. My father died within 6 months, and I became like a surrogate husband to my mother with 9 children. So my schooling was curtailed.***

For Sarah, aged 36 and married with three children, the barrier that prevented her applying sooner was giving birth to her first child.

> ***I mean I did it the opposite way round, I had a child very young and I didn't go to university after school whereas all my friends did. All my friends and acquaintances, everybody's got degrees for this that, they've all got bloody millions of degrees, you know (laughs).***

So for these women, practical circumstances prevented them applying to college earlier. For others, it was a belief they could not do it. Stephen is 28 years old. He is single with no children, and comes from a working-class background in Dublin. Although he desperately wanted to go to college after school, it was not the thing to do.

> ***I just love learning, I always did... . After school, like, college was just not an option. It was, like, working and try and bring in some money into the house; that type of thing. I know it's a bit of a cliché, but it's true, like you know. And the whole kind of, you know, anti-intellectual-like culture is just unbelievable as well. 'You're wha? You're going to college?' That kind of a way like. It just wasn't an option... 'what the feck are you doing, you know?'***

The abolition of third-level fees was an important incentive in the decision to apply to college. Joan took up the opportunity straight away.

> ***Well, this is my second time. I applied for the first time last year. That's because fees were abolished. That was the main reason. I couldn't have afforded to go otherwise. I was delighted when fees were abolished. I found out about mature students by accident. I read somebody else's book on unemployed people. I wondered if that would apply to me. So I found it did, and I was delighted applying to everything — very excited.***

There was also a strong sense among the participants that they deserved an opportunity. Louise believed it was her time.

> ***I'm just speaking personally, that I feel that I have worked for so long paying taxes to the government, that I would truly have loved to have got something back, because I was given the time and let them pay my fees. I must have paid fees for so many already (laughs). And I was quite delighted when I saw there was free tertiary education.***

The introduction of free fees was, then, a beacon of hope for these people. Kay is 28 years old, single, with no children. She already had a third level qualification; a National Certificate in Science from a Regional Technical College. After completing the Certificate she took up a variety of low-paid jobs. What she wants now is a career she finds interesting.

> ***The love of learning is first, but I would hope to bring it into a career. I want to study Archaeology and History because I'm mad about both of them, and I always have been and as I've gotten older I've been more and more interested. I'd want to pursue it as far as possible. I'd like to do a PhD if I can, you know. And hopefully make it into a lifestyle you know, a career.***

As we saw from the survey results, job prospects are not the only or main reason adult learners have for wanting to go to college. This is apparent in the interest in doing a degree in Arts. Although it is a foundation for professional qualifications, it is not a direct vocational qualification.

Noel's experience of the working world has revolved around various manual and low-paid clerical and service positions. He wanted to break free from the rut in which he found himself. He saw a degree as a chance to prove to himself that he could be different.

> ***It's something I really wanted to prove to myself, this idea that you've got to be a genius to get a degree. I always wondered, had I got it in me? Would I be able to make it through the four years? And somewhere down the line then, there is a consideration for possible future work. But it's not really what's driving me along. By the time I come out, I'll be eh, getting on a bit, so a career mightn't be it. But it's the satisfaction in actually doing what I'm doing, and you know, can I see this through to the end and can I come out with a decent degree? I felt that I wasn't achieving anything.***

Patricia is 47 years old, married with several children. She wanted to be paid for what she had previously been doing up until now on a voluntary basis. She felt the degree would help her achieve this. Her confidence had increased from attending courses over the years. She was convinced she could do it.

> ***I want an occupation from it, because I did a lot of work and I did it all voluntary, which I enjoy doing. But anytime a job came up, unless you've the piece of paper, you didn't get it. My confidence was built up. The more I studied, the more I passed exams. I realised I could do it. I realised you don't need to be a genius. If you apply yourself you have as good a chance as the kids coming through, with their 300-400 points.***

So for both Patricia and Noel, there was a desire to prove to themselves that college was not only an option for an elite, and that they were capable of completing a demanding course of study.

However, all the participants regretted not having completed a degree previously. Some experienced this regret while they were in school, others shortly after they had left. For young people like Noel, it was retrospective. They felt they should have put their minds into getting into college. Now they wanted to make up for it.

Reasons for Not Applying to Modular BA

The UCD Modular BA degree, which takes place in the evenings on a part-time basis, was designed specifically by the College to meet the needs of adult students. But our survey showed that only 8 per cent of our respondents had applied. This may seem strange given that there is an 84 per cent acceptance rate, compared to 6 per cent for full-time day degrees. When we asked respondents in our questionnaire why they did not apply for the Modular BA, 47 per cent stated clearly that they wanted a full-time day degree. The next most prominent reason given by one in five respondents was that the Modular BA degree fees were too expensive. (See Fig. 3.1)

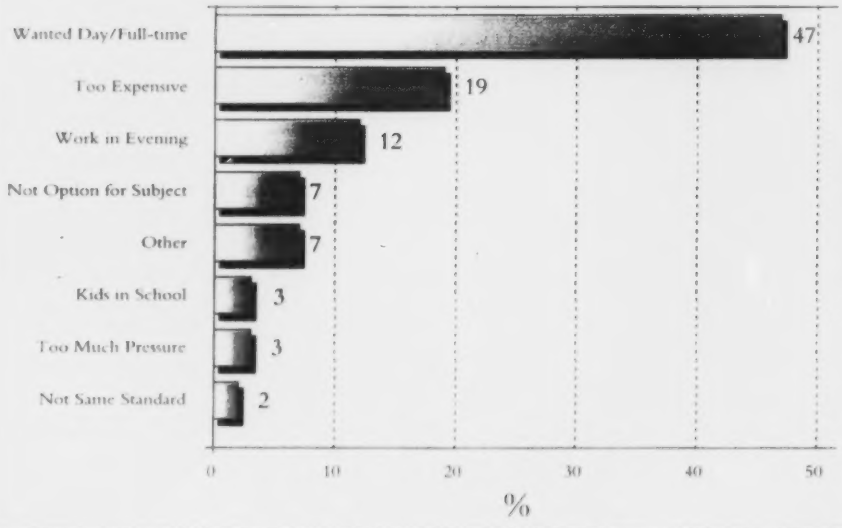
We were able to clarify some of these answers through our focus group discussion. Noel felt that the expense of the Modular BA was an important factor.

> ***If the modular system was altered, that people didn't pay for it... that was one of the considerations for me. I couldn't afford to do a modular thing. It's what £600 or £700 a subject?***

Fees also ruled out the Modular programme for Patricia. She is married with children. Paying to go to college was simply not an option.

> ***Well for most women, married women, it would nearly be impossible to do a modular course and pay for it. It's hard enough to get support to go back from your husband, without having to say I need £500 or £600 a module. They'd say, go in there and wash the dishes or something like that (laughs) you know. I'm being a bit flippant, but that's the case. They'll say well sure we've the mortgage to pay, we've shopping to do, you know, and the wife is always at the bottom of the list, the kids have to be educated, and you know.***

Fig. 3.1: Unsuccessful applicants:
Reasons for not applying to Modular BA



Both Patricia and Noel say they would have considered evening part-time study only for this financial barrier. As Noel put it,

> ***I think if somebody had come along to me and offered me the chance to do, say, a number of History modules for a year outside the college environment, but leading on to a point where I could join in or, even like, to do the whole degree, but that my financial circumstances wouldn't have been affected, I would have been prepared to take it.***

Apart from the issue of finances, there were other barriers that prevented people from taking up the Modular option. Five of the survey respondents said the Modular BA programme was not an option for the subjects they wished to study, for example, Commerce, Music and Science. One in eight of the survey respondents said they had work in the evening they wanted to keep. This was the case with Joan. She did not apply to the BA Modular programme because she was already occupied two evenings a week and did not want to give it up. Others could not go to evening classes because their children were in school during the day. This meant they would have to pay a babysitter in the evenings to mind their children. As Sarah said,

> ***I have two foster children at home. Even with that I said I'd go ahead and do it, but that's why I want to do a day course, because I could get somebody to mind them. Like they're in school in the morning, but I can have them in the afternoon. If I was to do a modular one, yeah, it's worse. You can pay someone to mind them. But then if you are doing courses at night, you are gonna get 'Oh I can't come tonight, you know I can do it next week.' But I would be relying on other people.***

Preparing for College

When preparing for college, many people complete an access course in order to further their chances of gaining a place. The number of access courses available is quite small. There are, for example, university foundation courses provided by the National College of Industrial Relations (NCIR) and Pearse College, and there are Return to Learning courses provided by UCD and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Over half (55 per cent) of our survey respondents had not taken an access course. Only eleven respondents had taken a Return to Learning or University Foundation Course. (See Table 9.1) The most common access course was the Leaving Certificate. This was taken by almost one-third of our respondents. Some of the unsuccessful applicants put a good deal of thought and effort into taking an access course. They were anxious to bolster their chances of being accepted. This is what happened to Noel.

> ***Initially I made an application to two or three colleges, but I hadn't done much preparation, and I got nowhere. So then I went back to my local community college and I did a certificate course and applied again to college, and following on that, I then went to UCD at night-time, and I did their Return to Learning course, and applied again.***

Patricia went back into adult education in 1990 when her children started going to primary school. This new beginning started a long process of preparation for applying to university. She took a couple of subjects in the Leaving Certificate. She then became heavily involved for several years in the administration of her local adult education group. During this period she completed a course in community development. She was then approached about a course that was being developed in the National College of Industrial Relations (NCIR).

This was a course organised within the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) project which was specifically orientated towards helping participants gain access to third level colleges. Foundation courses such as the one Patricia completed provide advice to mature student applicants about filling in application forms and about what different universities require from candidates.

The Leaving Certificate courses offered by further and community education colleges also provide similar advice, particularly to students on the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). This scheme enables long-term unemployed people to attend second-level educational courses while maintaining their social welfare benefits. Although he was unsuccessful in his application to UCD, Tom, who is 30 years old and has one child, found his VTOS course invaluable when it came to completing the CAO form and presenting information.

Access courses are demanding. People who complete these courses demonstrate that they have the commitment and energy to do a degree course. Brigid is 54, has two children and comes from a working-class suburb on the North-side of Dublin. She did her Leaving Certificate through VTOS in 1997. She described what happened during their Leaving Certificate course.

> ***When we went on the VTOS course, there were about 30 of us in class, and slowly but surely it whittled down to about 8 or 9 serious students. Half of those who dropped out did so because they had absolutely no back up from family, and that is very very sad.***

Experience of Applying to UCD

Unsuccessful applicants said they put a great deal of time and effort into their applications to different universities, including UCD. They were dismayed at the lack of information available about what is required to gain entry, and the correct procedures to follow in making an application. Universities have different procedures. UCD uses a version of the CAO form, while Trinity College and National University of Ireland, Maynooth have their own special forms.

Many applicants spend hours, or even days filling in these forms. It is a major investment on their part. For many, the personal motivation section of the application is the longest and most difficult to complete. There appears to be a lack of information as to what applicants need to have achieved to gain entry. Noel did not receive any outside advice. *'I just sort of worked it out in my head where I was falling down.'* Stephen experienced problems in obtaining information about UCD procedures.

> ***Trying to find out how do you apply for UCD, was, I dunno, trying to find a holy grail of information out there somewhere. And then I heard from other people, 'oh there's this CV involved, or you go to the Faculty itself' or something. But it's all like pub expert type stuff, you know? There's nothing hard and fast, no information to say this is what you do.***

The *'holy grail of information'*, as Stephen calls it, caused havoc with Patricia's application. As far as UCD was concerned, she received some misinformation that may have cost her a college place.

> ***We were told just put, you know, X amount of courses down and you can change your mind before July and I put down Arts in UCD, that's the only one I put in. And then I said, I can look at it again and change it. And when I rang UCD to inquire about that, the girl said no you can't change your mind, you can only change the order of your preferences. And I was really disappointed. I really wanted to do Social Science, and I actually thought Arts included Social Science.***

This lack of information leads to applicants coming under the influence of gossip, hearsay and conjecture. Sarah was forced to rely on advice from her sisters. David provided a litany of myths surrounding the mature application process.

> ***Did anyone go to a local TD? That was suggested to me, you know, you should go down to your local TD. I remember someone saying to me you should do a TEFL [Teaching English as a Foreign Language] course. Then someone said you're better off doing two subjects in the Leaving Cert. Someone else said... you're better off going on the Interrail travel for about 6 months; that'll stand to you. So nobody knows.***

Doing TEFL courses and getting the backing of your local TD are perhaps innocuous items of local knowledge when it comes to informing people of their choices. However, what could be more damaging is the assumption that places are open to any mature applicant who wants them. This has the effect of creating an over-optimistic view of the admissions process. David summarised what some people on his Leaving Certificate course assumed.

> ***I think there was this kind of fallacy going around that you know as a mature student, you don't need points. Most people are ill-informed, and they think initially like, oh yeah well that means that you just get in like. But they don't tell you that they only have so many places for mature students.***

Even looking back on their experiences of the previous year, there was still a sense of confusion about the application process and what was necessary to make a successful application. A quarter of our respondents thought they would definitely get into UCD. Another 8 per cent thought they would probably get in. In other words, almost one-third of our unsuccessful applicants thought that they would be accepted. (Table 3.4) In effect, the 13 respondents who believed they had no hope of getting in were the more realistic.

Table 3.4: Unsuccessful Applicants: Respondents' perception of likely success of their application.

Perception	Number	Per cent
Yes, would be accepted	18	25%
Probably would be.	6	8%
Possibly would be.	36	49%
No, would not	13	18%
Total	**73**	**100%**

Missing = 1

Being Rejected

Rejections, for most people, came through the post from the Central Applications Office in Galway. The majority (84 per cent) of our respondents received no letter or telephone call explaining to them why they had not been admitted to UCD. When they inquired, ten respondents were simply told that there was a limited number of places.

Not being admitted was a real blow for most. It produced a wide array of emotional responses ranging from disappointment to devastation, anger and resentment. When we conducted the focus group interview eight months later, the feelings of disappointment were still palpable. Joan's delight at finally being able to apply — after all the years had passed since she could not take up her school scholarship — turned to devastation when she realised she had got nothing. She could not comprehend being rejected.

> ***I was delighted first of all when I applied. I was convinced, with all the things I had heard about mature students and all I've done, you know, all the voluntary work I've done, all I'd done all through my life, and worked and paid taxes and done everything, definitely I'd be considered. I know how I felt from the CAO in Galway telling me I got nothing, I know how devastated I felt that day.***

Brigid felt she had been slapped in the face, not only by not getting in, but also because of the lack of communication. She felt that at her age, after what she had done with her life, she deserved better than that.

> ***I felt very resentful about not hearing from UCD at all. I'll tell you why, as you can see I'm no spring chicken. I've been working since I was 14 years of age, which meant that was the end of my education. I worked then until I was 51, slight breaks in between, paying through the nose on taxes and PRSI, and for young people to be educated. Now I felt that now is my chance to get what I should have got years ago, that it's in the constitution about treating all children equally. I had certainly not been treated as an equal of a rich man's child. And here I had an opportunity to gain an education, and UCD, the National University of Ireland don't even look at you. Terrible.***

Noel felt the same way. He could not believe that after applying more than once and having completed the Return to Learning course, UCD would not even consider him for of an interview.

> ***In my application I applied to all three, Trinity, Maynooth and UCD... and I've been interviewed for Trinity, I've been interviewed for Maynooth. But UCD absolutely nothing; even after doing a course with them. I was really surprised. I've applied to UCD twice if not three times, and with all the courses I've done, including going to UCD, that I never even got called for an interview.***

Kay was disappointed that UCD did not take into consideration her previous experience and education. She was also confused as to why she had not been considered.

> ***I thought I sort of had an okay chance really because of my life experience and my previous education. So I was quite disappointed when I didn't get in, and ehm, I didn't know why, specifically why.***

Words such as 'ignorant' and 'thoughtless' were used by Stephen and Tom to describe the impression left on them by UCD. Stephen, in particular, took his rejection hard. It strengthened his feelings that he was wasting his time.

> ***I felt insulted because I mean, well first of all I feel like a feckin' eejit for wanting to actually think of going back to college, of packing in a job, and [referring to friends] they're staring at ya, like you have ten heads anyway, like you know, what the hell are you thinking of doing, or whatever, you know? And then you get this wonderful blanket nothing from UCD, or whatever you know, it's a real reinforcement of,***

'would you ever just cop on to yourself and keep working', you know? That may not be the intention, but that was my experience.

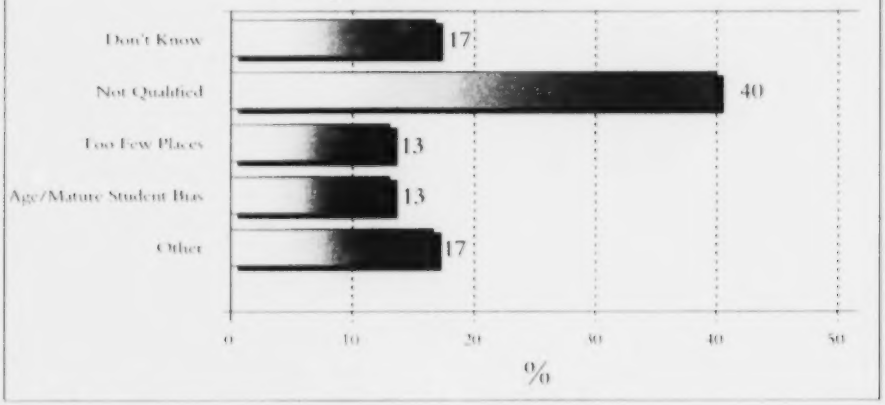
A feeling of powerlessness was evident among our participants. They did not know why they were rejected, they did not know who rejected them, and it did not seem there was much they could do to change the situation. Stephen had come to terms with not being accepted, but felt that it was *'thoughtless'* not being told why. There was a common feeling that UCD had led them up the garden path. As Sarah said *'it's like you're brought so far and then dropped'*. This was supported by Joan. *'They're all educating us to get into somewhere where there's nowhere to get into'*.

Perceptions of Lack of Success

Our survey results provide several reasons why respondents thought their applications were not successful. (See Fig. 3.2) The most common explanation — given by four in ten of the respondents — was that they were not sufficiently qualified. This, so to speak, is to blame themselves. But the majority of the respondents seemed confused.

One in six said simply they did not know. One in eight felt that there were not enough places. A similar number felt there was a bias against mature students.

Fig. 3.2: Unsuccessful applicants: Perceptions of lack of success



When we asked the participants in the focus group why their applications had not been successful, we received some further explanations. Participants felt there were two reasons why they were not accepted: (a) not knowing the right people and, (b) UCD's desire to make money. Participants felt that UCD, far from assessing each applicant on their individual merits, qualifications and experience, had no formal policy regarding admissions. Decisions on who were accepted as mature students depended on who applicants knew and their contact with the decision makers. Patricia and Stephen felt that UCD wanted to make money out of mature students and, consequently, directed them towards the Modular BA programme. Stephen was particularly upset.

They seem to gear you towards night-time courses, which are still fee paid, which I thought was quite cynical y'know. If you really want to go back as an adult, well we have these courses here, but they cost, like one or two thousand pounds a year, like you know, and you won't get any money for it, plus it's at night and it's at weekends and the libraries are jammed. I just thought it was very negative and quite cynical.

In reality, people do not know what happens after they send in their application forms for consideration. There was much guessing based on stories and other people's experiences. Noel summarised the feelings of many.

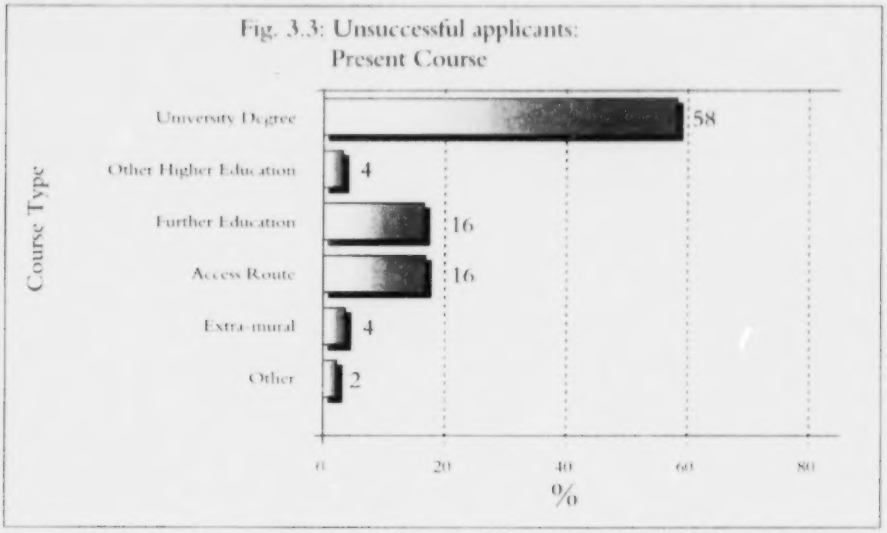
> ***You see that's one of the problems, we've absolutely no idea, particularly with UCD, you know. All these machinations are going on in the background, and like no-one has any idea whether it's the flick of a dice or it's the [Leaving Certificate] points.***

Looking Back on their Experience

Applying to, and being rejected by UCD was obviously not an enjoyable experience for the people in our study. They were excited and hopeful about the prospect of studying for a degree at the university. It was something many had dreamt about and spent a long time trying to achieve. The feeling of disappointment was combined with feelings of anger and resentment at the way UCD had treated their application. But this did not stop their efforts to secure a place in higher education. Seven in ten of the respondents to our survey had taken up places on other third-level courses. Most (85 per cent) of the respondents were full-time students. More than half were studying for degree courses. (See Fig. 3.3) This is what happened to Noel, Patricia, Tom and Brigid. Noel is presently studying History and Italian at Trinity College. He applied to UCD several years in succession, and had done the Return to Learning course to improve his chances of being selected. His efforts eventually gained him a place in Trinity.

> ***Probably over a 5-year period from the initial (attempt), it's taken me four applications to college to get that place. Every time I got turned down, I thought well what can I do now to improve my chances next time, and I went about trying to fill in the gaps.***

Fig. 3.3: Unsuccessful applicants: Present Course



Patricia gained a place in the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) in their BA programme. She is delighted with the course and describes her experience of being a mature student in higher education in glowing terms. She thinks that mature students are appreciated by DIT, and make a significant contribution to the academic life and social atmosphere of the college.

> ***I haven't missed a lecture since the day I started, and the other mature students who are with me, if they have missed, it's because of a parent teacher meeting or communion ... real genuine you know, highly motivated people. The lecturers are delighted with the mature students... . They get feedback. Only for them the place would be dead, you know. It'd be like talking to the wall, nobody asks a question, nobody gives an answer. If a mature student says something, somebody else then would join in.***

Tom gained a place on the Humanities BA Degree in St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra. He is also enjoying his experience of higher education.

> ***I'm in St. Pat's and it's brilliant. And it's like the total opposite, totally pro the mature student. There's only 1,000 students and 100 mature students, and more maybe. That's like unbelievable. We're well represented in there.***

Those who did not gain entry to a degree course are applying again this year. Sarah, Joan, Kay, David and Stephen were all once more hoping that UCD would give them a place. Again, there was a great deal of preparation and planning going into their applications. Kay, David and Stephen were taking access courses. Kay was taking the Return to Learning course. Like Noel last year, she believed this would help her to get into the UCD Arts Degree. She put even more effort into her application this time.

> ***I tried to make it more, make it seem like I was much more motivated, which I am, very much. Trying to really make them see how motivated I am, or trying to make it sound a bit more sort of professional or polished.***

David is taking the Leaving Certificate again because *'it looks like the only way I can get in'*. He wants to gain the points for Arts rather than relying solely on his application form. Stephen is enrolled in the University Foundation Course at Pearse College. For those who were not lucky enough to get in last year, renewed energy and commitment have been put into their efforts to secure a place. Given that only one in sixteen will be offered a place, for many this energy and commitment may be misplaced.

Suggested policy changes

Our participants offered several opinions as to how UCD could change its policy on mature students. They were adamant that UCD should take in more mature students. Noel claimed that this was only fair given the lack of motivation of some of the younger students.

> ***I think that the mature students really want to do it, and that it's certainly evident from being around college. A lot of the younger kids, they're really there to have a good time. So I would favour a more mature friendly system.***

The participants in our focus group interview were aware that policy does not change overnight. They realised that the College does not have sufficient room for both mature and standard-entry students. As Patricia said, *'there isn't room for both. If there was room for both, we'd all be in UCD (laughs)'*. However, participants felt that there could be a change in policy in relation to establishing different procedures for mature student admissions, and a different degree structure for those accepted.

Different procedures for admission: Participants felt that while there was a need for formal criteria by which mature student applications were assessed, these should be different to

those applied to school-leavers. Most felt that it was unfair and unreliable to judge applications solely on the basis of their CAO applications. Mature students had different qualities such as work experience, which could not be easily gauged through the CAO form. One popular suggestion was to hold interviews. This is a standard procedure for mature student applications in other universities. Louise felt that *'an interview would perhaps be a fairer system.'* An interview would, it was felt, provide candidates with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability and what they had to offer. The lack of opportunity to, so to speak, sell themselves face-to-face was also commented on by many of our survey respondents.

Different degree structure: The belief that mature applicants are different and require special consideration was reflected in suggested changes to the degree structure. All the participants felt that an on-campus, full-time degree course was what mature students wanted. This explained why so many applied for such courses. At the same time, participants saw the Modular BA as the least desirable option. However, some accepted that there could be a compromise between the two options, especially if there were no fees.

Two suggestions were made. One was a combination of on-campus and off-campus courses in an outreach centre. A combination of courses was an acceptable option for Joan. *'The mixture would be good, if it wasn't all in an outreach centre. It would have to be combined.'*

Another suggestion was a foundation course specifically geared towards mature students and formally connected to third level institutions. The foundation course could be similar to those offered by NCIR and Pearse College, and would offer people an opportunity to test whether they were able for third-level education. Participants in the focus group interview felt that if people successfully completed such courses, they should be offered places in college. Despite some practical difficulties, David thought such a system could work.

> ***I think they should have a course for a year, a pre-university course, and, designed, say if you want to do an Arts degree, almost like directed towards that, and have an exam at the end of the year. And if you pass it, that's as good as your 390 (points). … You could have it for one body, and all the colleges would have to agree.***

Kay also believed that an approved foundation course, based on the first year of a degree programme could benefit mature students in the long run.

> ***Yeah, I think that's a good idea, definitely, 'cause then you find out yourself as well if you really want to go ahead and do it, and they can tell if you are able to study and do exams, you know?***

Conclusion

There are, then, numerous, almost insurmountable, barriers that prevent adult learners fulfilling their dream of becoming full-time mature students in UCD. The major barrier is the high level of demand and the low level of places. The findings of our survey show that unsuccessful applicants are more likely to be young, single, male, and working in various low-wage jobs. Perhaps the major theme that emerges from this chapter is the determination by so many adult learners to do whatever is necessary to obtain a place as a mature student in UCD. This determination exists despite the fact that there is no clear indication what is required for them to be accepted and that only one in sixteen of those who apply will be accepted. And yet, many unsuccessful applicants who have not been accepted this year, will go on to take further education courses in order to improve their chances next year. Many also put a great deal of effort into completing their application

forms. They do not know the reason why their applications were unsuccessful. They are vulnerable to rumours and conjectures, but they are still willing — outside of obtaining the necessary points from the Leaving Certificate — to do whatever needs to be done to gain entry as a full-time, day student. They want to study during the day for a degree programme of their choice. They are not interested in UCD's main solution to the problem, that they should pay fees and study for a Modular BA degree in the evening. There are four and a half times more applicants for day degrees than there is for the Modular programme.

The problem, then, with UCD's solution to the demand by adult learners to gain entry to the College, is that the Modular BA programme tends to favour those who can afford to pay the fees. It should be acknowledged that, when the Modular programme was launched, all courses were fee-paying, and the programme was a considerable effort to meet the needs of adult learners at that time. Circumstances have changed, however, and policy regarding part-time fees has not been altered. In other words, the Modular programme favours the privileged. But our research indicates that it is the underprivileged — particularly those who are unemployed or in insecure, low-paid jobs — who are least successful in gaining entry to the day-time programme for which they would have to pay no fees and would perhaps be eligible for a Back to Education allowance. It may well be, then, that UCD's policy of operating a Modular BA programme and a restricted entry to day-time degrees has the unintended consequence of contributing to rather than reducing social inequality in Ireland. In this respect UCD should note and implement the policy recommendations in the Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education.

Chapter 4

Full-time Mature Students in UCD

In this chapter we look at the experiences of full-time mature students in UCD. What kinds of difficulties do they encounter coming to college as adult learners? How do they cope with coming to university, writing essays, sitting examinations, and the general stress of student life? What impact does being a mature student have on their family, their work and their friendships? How do they think they are accepted and treated by the College, lecturers, tutors and fellow students?

Previous research on mature students in Ireland has tended to focus on issues of access, focusing on policies needed to increase mature student enrolments. The emphasis is on how higher education institutions can change to make themselves more 'attractive, relevant and open to all sections of the population' (Wright,1991:7). Issues of access have, then, to do with what happens before students arrive at university. What kind of students in terms of their socio-economic and educational background get into UCD? But we are also interested in examining issues of accessibility. How, so to speak, do mature students survive once they arrive?

It is important to understand the successes and failures of mature students at university. Policies to increase equality of opportunity can only be successful if they are matched by policies to ensure equality of outcome. Research on the difficulties encountered by mature students while at college is, then, particularly relevant to UCD as it critically reflects about its role in, and responsibilities to, Irish society. But it is also relevant to the state and the agencies involved in the formulation of higher education policy.

In 1997, there were 142 full-time mature students registered on undergraduate degree programmes in UCD. (Table 4.1) This represents 1.2 per cent of the total undergraduate population of 11,276. The majority (58 per cent) of mature students were registered for Arts and Social Science degree courses. This reflects the demand for places described in the previous chapter. One-fifth of mature students were registered in the Agriculture Faculty.

There are two modes of entry for full-time mature students at UCD. The first is by applicants gaining the necessary Leaving Certificate points for entry under the normal rules, and having the necessary matriculation subjects. The second mode is the student who does not have the necessary points or matriculation subjects, but who is accepted on the grounds of experience and mature years, that is being over 23 years of age. Since 1992, the majority of mature students (78 per cent) in UCD have been those accepted on the grounds of mature years without the necessary CAO points. (Table 9.1)

Table 4.1: Undergraduate full-time mature students in UCD 1997-98						
Course	**Year**				**Total**	
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	No.	%
Arts Day (Incl. Music)	16	20	22	3	61	43
Commerce	1	2	2	0	5	4
Engineering/Architecture	5	2	1	0	8	6
Law	2	3	4	0	9	6
Science	1	4	2	2	9	6
Social Science	10	6	5	0	21	15
Agriculture	10	9	8	2	29	20
Total	**45**	**46**	**44**	**7**	**142**	**100**

Previous Research

In their study of full-time mature students in the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Fleming and Murphy (1997) found that the vast majority (91 per cent) had a positive experience of university. This reflected research findings from Britain which showed that adult learners were 'overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the benefits of mature study' (Woodley *et al*,1987:104). Nevertheless, mature students experience difficulties during their degree programme. Leaving aside more academic problems, previous research indicates two major issues that affect mature students — financial problems and external commitments.

As Roderick (1981) pointed out, enrolling in a full-time higher education course can mean a significant decrease in income, particularly for those who had been employed. Woodley *et al* (1987:127) found that one-third of full-time students were financially 'much worse off than ever before'.

Research also indicates that a student's gender and social class, influences the level of financial difficulty they experience (Bryant,1995; Burkitt,1995). In Ireland, the Technical Working Group for the Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education, found that inadequate financial resources was the main difficulty experienced by full-time mature students (Lynch,1997:100). It was a particular problem for students from working-class backgrounds (Lynch,1996:22). Fleming and Murphy noted that lone parents were in the 'at-risk' category when it came to financial hardship (1997:37).

Smithers and Griffin (1986:113) found that mature students with families suffered most financially. In particular, lone parents, or couples who were both students, experienced financial hardship. In their overview of the experience of mature students in England, Gallagher *et al* (1993) pointed out that it would be surprising if mature students did not encounter some financial problems. As they put it, 'returning to learning entails either a sharp reduction in income, or remaining on a low income' (1993:21).

There has been considerable research, debate and discussion on mature students' external commitments, particularly in relation to family responsibilities. The research points to family commitments as a major issue (Dowling,1992; Edwards,1993; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Maynard and Pearsall,1994; Redding and Wakeford,1994). In their study, Smithers and Griffin (1986:110) found that just over one-third of married women experienced problems with family commitments; an experience not shared by male married students.

> ***Men with families sometimes stayed at university after lectures because it was difficult to get time for uninterrupted study at home: 'if I am at home I am, by definition, not at work.' Women, on the other hand, frequently had to dash off home in order to receive children from school. Study was often fitted in when the children were in bed.***

University life can damage relationships. Several studies (Edwards,1990; Cochrane,1991; James,1995; Wray,1996) cite returning to study as a major source of conflict between partners. Many spouses, particularly men, resent the changes that have happened when their partners become mature students. One woman in Kelly's study (1987) described the problems she faces from her husband.

> ***Well, he thought he was marrying a woman ... who was always going to be there when he got home, and revolve her whole life around him. But I changed. In his eyes he hasn't. So he claims that his needs are the same as the day he married, whereas mine are very different (Kelly,1987:165).***

Experience in College

Several studies have focussed on the relationship between lecturers and mature students. Elsey (1982) found that mature students generally held positive views about academic staff. However, others found mature students had negative experiences with lecturers and tutors (Crozier and Garbert-Jones,1996:195). Most of the problems of mature students relate to essays and reading loads. Moss (1988) found that mature students suffered undue anxiety with reading lists, and needed guidance on reading techniques. Mature students had a tendency to attempt to read too much. Essays also caused anxieties and threats to self-esteem. Metcalf (1993:11) argued that this kind of anxiety can be easily overcome.

> ***More specific instructions on what was demanded in an essay would have eased anxiety and enabled students to learn more quickly. More explanation would also help, as lack of understanding of grading caused anxiety.***

Baines (1986) found that the first essay caused major problems and that a student's self-confidence could be severely undermined by lecturer or tutor criticism. A very clear example in the Irish context came from Fleming and Murphy's study. A female mature student did not do as well as she hoped in her first essay.

> ***The amount of work I put in to the essay, and she (the lecturer) just said to me, you just passed it, and it was like putting a knife in my back, and she went, oh for God's sake, and she turned around and said, 'that's the thing about mature students'. And I went 'what do you mean?' And she went, 'you take everything to heart'... .It was a major shock just passing it, 'cause I had done a lot of work... I went up to the lecturer and said to her, 'I can't do this (the essay)', and she said just go home and write from the heart. So I went home and wrote this flowery essay... (1997:54-55).***

It may be that this high level of anxiety is a manifestation of a very different perception of life experience, and its value in higher education. In Johnson and Locke's study (1990), mature students wanted their experience to be valued, but found there was 'tension between the practical and academic aspects of [the] course, with students sometimes feeling that lecturers did not incorporate the practical knowledge of mature students into the academic teaching and learning'(1990:34).

Weil (1986;1988) found examples of a similar conflict among the students she interviewed. The following quote from one of her respondents typified the feelings generated when mature students are rudely made aware of their subordinate role.

> ***The first year you learn that the boundaries are clearly defined by the institution. You're ignorant. You don't know what to expect. There was a useful comment one lecturer made. 'Undergraduates have no opinion.' You are made to feel that way, to say, 'I am the clay, you are the potter. Shape me, mould me.' (Quoted in Weil,1986:226).***

Weil's work on learner identity suggests it is the way in which the teacher and the institution relate to the student that causes this loss of confidence.

All mature students experience some degree of difficulty with studying and study skills, mostly because the typical mature student has been away from formal education for some time (Johnston and Bailey,1984; Woodley *et al*,1987). Bourner (1991:68) found that two-thirds of the respondents in his study 'were not aware of receiving any study skills guidance at the outset of their courses'. The danger time, it seems, was the first year of the course. Johnston and Bailey (1984:9) discovered that some mature students had dropped out of their courses early because of work overload. At the same time, they pointed out that by the third term of the course, 'most of the complaints of overload were retrospective, as most students had learnt to pace themselves' (1984:9). It seems the danger period was during the early stages of the course.

Some research has been done on the important area of exams. This has ramifications for policy formation. The simple question, as Woodley (1984:35) put it, is 'do mature students do better or worse than younger students?' The simple answer is that they achieve the same results. Most studies that have documented exam results show mature students perform similarly to traditional school-leaving students (Metcalf,1993; Smithers and Griffin,1986; Richardson,1995; Fleming and Murphy,1997). In their study of mature students Hopper and Osborne (1975) found that, measured by exams, the success rate of mature students is the same as that of traditional entrants. Roderick (1981), who did a study of mature students at the University of Sheffield, had similar conclusions. Here, 36 per cent of mature students received a 'good' degree (first or upper second class honours), while 35 per cent of traditional students obtained the same degree. Richardson (1995:5) summarised these findings.

> ***In terms of both their persistence and their attainment, the subsequent academic performance of the mature students on their degree courses was at least as good as that of the non-mature students.***

However, there is research that highlights the negative side of exam results. Woodley (1984:45), for example, points out that mature students 'are slightly more likely to leave university without a degree'. In Roderick's study (1981), mature students were more likely to fail or obtain a 'poor' degree (third class honours or pass degrees).

Finally, there is inconclusive evidence on age differences. Woodley (1984:46) found that age was a factor in exam results for mature students: 'students aged 26 to 30 are more likely to gain a first or upper second, and beyond this point performance declines with age'. Hartley and Lapping (1992), however, found no significant difference in exam results based on age. Smithers and Griffin (1986:124) also found no significant difference between normally qualifying mature students and those who came in on 'special schemes'. They conclude that 'mature unqualified students tended to do at least as well as other students at the honours degree level'. In fact, the rate of failure and withdrawal among unqualified entrants was lower than for qualified entrants — 9.7 per cent as compared to 12 per cent.

The Experience of Full-time Mature Students in UCD

A questionnaire was sent to all full-time mature students registered on undergraduate full-time degree programmes at UCD. We excluded the 45 students who had entered at the beginning of the academic year 1997-98 since they would have only been in college for a few months. We also excluded part-time students — those studying for the Modular BA — from this analysis. This gave us a population of 98 students. We obtained 62 responses — giving a response rate of 63 per cent. (See Table 9.1)

The majority of our respondents were male (58 per cent), single (63 per cent), with no children (69 per cent). Full-time mature students in UCD were, then, similar to unsuccessful applicants in terms of gender, marital status and number of children. (See Table 4.2)

Table 4.2. A social profile of full-time mature students in UCD

Characteristics	Per cent
(General)	
Male	58%
Single	63%
Have no children	69%
(Education)	
Completed Leaving Certificate	82%
Fulfilled matriculation requirements	67%
(Socio-economic status)	
Come from professional/managerial background	53%
Worked in stable employment	52%

Eighty-two per cent of the students had completed their Leaving Certificate. A large proportion (47 per cent) gained four or more honours, while 67 per cent fulfilled third level matriculation requirements. Only 10 per cent had failed their Leaving Certificate.

Seventy-four per cent had completed other education courses since they left school. Over one third (36 per cent) had taken further education courses. Eleven per cent had nursing qualifications. One-third (34 per cent) had previous experience of higher education.

Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) of the students had parents who left school before their Leaving Certificate, but nearly a quarter (22 per cent) of the students had parents who had gained a third level qualification. Over half (53 per cent) of successful applicants had parents in professional positions.

The majority of mature students (52 per cent) were in stable employment prior to coming to college. Sixteen per cent were nurses. Only a third of respondents had occupied various low-wage positions in their working lives. Unsuccessful applicants are twice as likely to have occupied such positions.

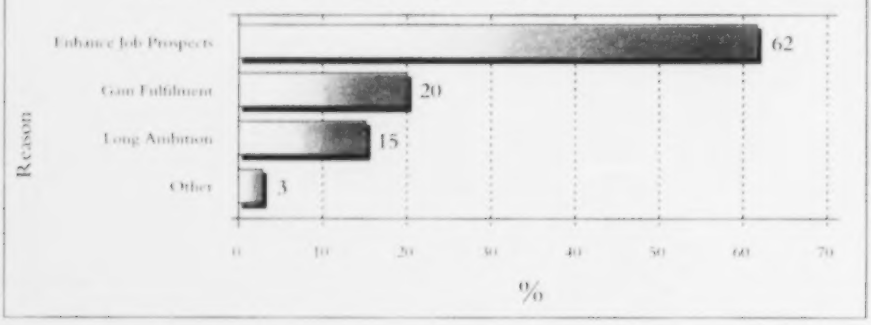
To summarise, although full-time mature students resembled unsuccessful applicants in terms of gender, marital status and in not having children, they differed when it came to education and occupational background. Those who gained entry to UCD were more likely to have had previous experience of higher education, and more likely to have done relatively well in the Leaving Certificate. They were also more likely to have parents who had been to college. The social backgrounds of full-time mature students in UCD are, then, somewhat similar to standard entry students in higher education generally (Clancy,1988).

Reasons for going to college

Full-time mature students had definite reasons for pursuing a degree. Nearly two-thirds (62 per cent) wanted to increase their job prospects. (See Fig. 4.1) One-fifth said they wanted to learn and gain knowledge, while another 15 per cent simply stated that a university degree was an ambition they had held for a long time.

We carried out a focus group interview with full-time mature students to discuss their experience of being in UCD. These were chosen from respondents to our questionnaire who said they would be willing to participate in such an interview. Nine respondents participated. One of these was Keith. He is 34, single and a second year student. Keith was one of those who came to college to increase his employment prospects. He wanted to *'rethink'* his career choices especially in the caring professions. For Michael, who was 66 years old and had retired from his job as a managing director, going back to study for a degree in History was a long-term ambition. For Brendan, also 66 years and retired from being a postman, going to college was much more about personal fulfilment and self-improvement. He wanted *'to try and see if it was possible to find out more about life'*.

Fig. 4.1: Main reason for going to college, full time students



Preparing for and applying to college

Less than three in ten (29 per cent) of successful applicants had taken an access course. (See Table 9.1) This compares to 45 per cent of the unsuccessful applicants. Many successful applicants already had experience of higher education, and had obtained a relatively good result in the Leaving Certificate. The most common access route was the Leaving Certificate (18 per cent); 8 per cent took a foundation course, and 7 per cent completed one of the return to learning courses. Brendan took the Pearse College foundation course. He found it helpful and believed it was a major factor in having been accepted.

> ***The pre-university course gave you some idea of what it was like because they had Philosophy, Psychology, English and History. So there was a very broad [choice] … and they tried to work on what university was like.***

Nora, who was 56 years old and married with two children, took the Return to Learning course in UCD. She believed it contributed to her success in gaining a place.

> ***I was recommended to take the Return to Learning course. Again it didn't involve an interview, but you were recommended to come out during the summer months and see how your application was doing. And when I phoned up, they asked me to hold on, came back and said, yes we can offer you a place. Well (laughs) I was told it would [help] and it did.***

Nevertheless, successful entrants were generally in the same position as those who were not successful. They were confused about the application process and the criteria used for admissions. Fiona was 46 years old, and separated with several children. She applied to Science and although she already had some experience of higher education — she did five years of Medicine at UCD — she did not understand what the College was looking for.

> ***I didn't know. I mean I filled in the CAO form, but ... didn't actually know what the qualifications were for me, somebody like me. And it was very hard to know what chance we had.***

She is now in the fourth year of her Science degree, and she is still not sure why she was accepted.

> ***I was quite surprised to be honest... I didn't have any problems at all, I applied through the CAO and had an interview. I was accepted I think on the combination of the two. I'm not sure. I had done a few years of medicine about 25 years ago. And that helped.***

Margaret was also surprised when she gained a place on the Arts degree. She is 48 years of age, and married with several children. She spoke about the confusion in the admissions process, and what the implications were for those who were unsuccessful in their applications.

> ***I think people maybe don't know what they should do in order to get in. I got in on the first time, which was fine, but ehm, on the other hand when I was applying, I didn't really know what my chances were, or what I could do to enhance them... people who don't get accepted on the first time sometimes don't know why, and therefore it's a bit hard to go about it maybe, and to know what to do to get in the next time.***

The admissions procedure appeared arbitrary to these students. Seamus, who was 29 years old and in his third year in Agriculture, echoed the sentiments of the unsuccessful applicants described in the last chapter.

> ***I don't actually know what the formal structure is, it seems to be different from department to department, so I don't know what they could actually do to improve it, as I don't know what it is in the first place.***

Experience in UCD

Nearly half (46 per cent) of our respondents said that learning and the pursuit of knowledge were what they enjoyed most about UCD. (See Table 4.3) Although the majority of mature students wanted to complete a degree to enhance their employment prospects, they also came to university to study a subject in which they were interested. A degree is viewed as a way of entering a career they would enjoy. Carol, who was 27 years old, single and in her 3rd Year, enjoyed 'learning new things all the time and appreciating the value of this knowledge'. Keith believed UCD allowed him to *'gain and expand my existing knowledge, bringing me in contact with ideas and theories'*.

Mature students welcomed the contact with other people. A quarter (24 per cent) said this was the most enjoyable aspect of student life. For Margaret, who is now in her second year of an Arts degree, meeting people was a surprising bonus of gaining access to UCD. 'I feel I've got to know a lot of different people and I've enjoyed that, and I wasn't thinking of it like that. But that turned out to be a nice side.'

On the negative side, the least enjoyable aspect for mature students was the age difference between themselves and the younger students. Four in ten said they did not appreciate this part of college life. 'Isolated' was a word used several times in our discussion. This is not surprising as mature students comprise a very small percentage of the overall student population. Fiona felt she 'stuck out like a sore thumb last year.' For Michael, the sense of isolation was strongest at the beginning of the course, when orientations were being conducted. He was in 3rd year, and believed mature students should be treated differently.

I felt lost at the outset with facilities, how to use the library, how to find your way around the college... Going to the library, you don't want to be joining 60 or 70 other 18 year olds to be got around. Because the way in which you're going to accept the information is different to the way in which someone who's just come out of school last year is going to... . The kids who come straight out; it's just a continuum of what they've been doing.

Table 4.3: What full-time mature students considered the most/least enjoyable aspects of college

Most Enjoyable	No.	%	Least Enjoyable	No.	%
Learning	25	46%	Age Difference	20	40%
Social Contact	13	24%	Course Load	8	16%
Staff	3	6%	External Commitments	5	10%
Atmosphere	4	7%	Staff/facilities	3	6%
None	4	7%	Financial	5	10%
Other	5	10%	None	4	8%
Total	**54**	**100**	Other	5	10%
			Total	**50**	**100**

Missing = 8 Missing = 12

The difference in age was also a problem in classroom situations, particularly in tutorials. Participants in the focus group interview felt uncomfortable in these situations. They felt that pressure was on them to provoke discussions and debate. Keith found this to be an ongoing scenario.

Oftentimes because you're a mature student, you probably have that little bit more confidence than an 18 year old, so you tend to monopolise say conversations and things like that with the tutor, go off on your tracks, you know what I mean? And sometimes you wonder should you ask questions of the tutor, should you chase them up, and if you do, when to stop monopolising ... It's Jesus, will somebody else jump in here and take the space. ...That's frustrating for me, anyway.

It has reached a stage for some mature students that they find themselves in a dilemma as to what to do in these situations. They are aware that while lecturers are looking to them for input, younger students are unwilling or unable to voice an opinion. Margaret feels uncomfortable when such situations arise.

If [the lecturer] asks someone directly, they might actually know the answer, they just don't volunteer it. You're sitting there with silence for sort of several seconds, and you might know the answer yourself. You don't know whether you should say it or not. But in fact if he picks on somebody, they very often do know it, they just didn't volunteer it.

These situations have the unfortunate consequence of decreasing or even preventing the input of some mature students in discussions. Maeve is 35 years old, married, and a second year Social Science student. She has decided to stop contributing.

I find in tutorials that I feel I'm not opening my mouth this week. I'm not going to say a word 'cause all the others are sitting they're saying, 'Oh when is this tutorial finishing.' Whereas they're just waitin' for us to talk, 'cause I just get embarrassed 'cause I know the tutor probably as a person rather than as I would years ago as somebody who's in authority, or something like that. So it would actually stop me talking.

When it comes to performance in examinations, mature students appear to do very well. Only three of our respondents failed a subject in first year. (See Table 4.4) There is also a high proportion, nearly half, that gained all honours in first year. This finding reflects the previous research findings. Full-time mature students do well in exam situations.

Table 4.4: First year exam results, full-time students		
Results	**Number**	**Per cent**
All Honours	26	48%
Honours/Passes	15	28%
All Passes	9	16%
Pass/Fail	2	4%
All Fails	1	2%
Other	1	2%
Total	**54**	**100**

Missing = 8

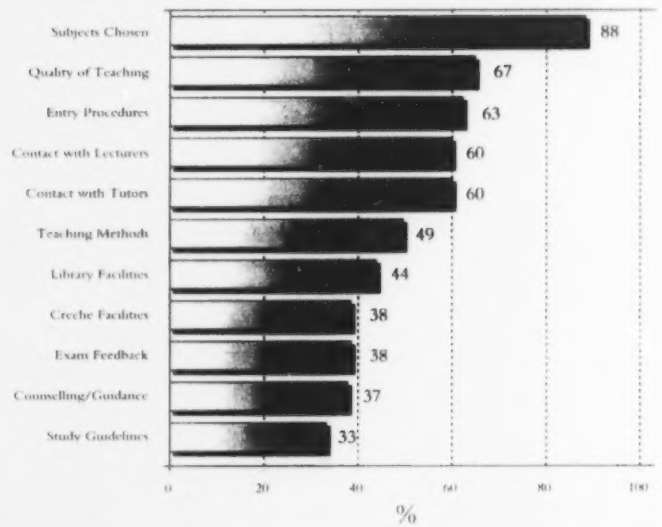
Official UCD figures for 1997 first-year exam results show the failure rate among mature students at 7 per cent. However, the apparent success rate of mature students has to be put within the context of a high withdrawal rate. More than one in five (22 per cent) of first year mature students were absent from their exams in 1997. We will return to this issue of absenteeism in chapter 7.

Experience of the Degree Course

We asked respondents to indicate their level of satisfaction with their degree course. The results were very encouraging. The vast majority (88 per cent) were happy with the choice of subjects they made. (Fig. 4.2) Two-thirds (67 per cent) felt the quality of teaching on offer at UCD was satisfactory. Respondents were also generally satisfied with the entry procedure, but this might not be surprising since they were successful in gaining entry.

Satisfaction levels begin to decrease when other aspects of college life were questioned. Library and créche facilities received poor ratings. Only half of our respondents were satisfied with teaching methods used by staff at the college. The focus on mature students in tutorial discussions may have been a factor here. Mature students are also dissatisfied that their age and experience are ignored. This was how Maeve felt.

Fig. 4.2: Satisfaction* with aspects of college, full-time students



*indicates response of satisfied or very satisfied

> ***I feel quite excluded during the lectures because you really feel like a minority. Because lecturers, they always assume that you're 17 years of age, and they say things... when they're using examples, they'd say, 'and maybe you asked your parents could you go out that night,' something like that (laughs). And it's totally removed from any mature student. And I always feel well ok fair enough, you know, you couldn't be in sociology where there's 600 students there and they're all relating to that. But the very fact that we're all here means that we should be catered for and not just completely ignored in the asides that are made.***

The lowest satisfaction rates are for those aspects specifically related to mature student's own approach to learning. Only one third of our respondents felt that exam feedback, counselling and guidance and study guidelines were satisfactory. Research indicates that these are crucial factors in the progression of mature students through their courses.

Previous research also indicates that first year is a danger time for mature students. From the discussion in the focus groups, this is also the case in UCD. Brendan was in 3rd Year Arts. He found first year particularly difficult, and was surprised when he survived.

> ***I think first year is terrible, how on earth did I get through first year, you've all these new things, you need to get essays, and then all of a sudden it's Christmas break, you go mad (laughs)... I found it very hard just after the Christmas break. You were finished with it for a few weeks and I said, oh I'm not going back. And I did.***

Mature students experience particular pressure in first year studying for exams and writing essays. The first essay caused confusion for our participants. It was not clear what lecturers and tutors required. Margaret experienced this with her first essay.

> ***I think especially with writing essays at the beginning too, you don't know what is required, you kill yourself doing it, but you mightn't be on the point. And it must be a learning process, I suppose, you don't always get it right anyway, first time around or anything, subsequent times, but maybe by second year you have a better idea about how to go about it.***

First year exams created a sense of outright panic among the participants in our focus group interview. It led to a situation where some students miscalculated their ability. The lack of examination practice meant that they were at a disadvantage when compared to 17 and 18 year-old students. Fiona could not comprehend the standards set for exams. This resulted in high levels of anxiety.

> ***I think it's the fact that you haven't just done your Leaving Cert., so you don't know how you rate compared to the other students. You don't know what the standard is in exams, so you actually don't know when you do an exam whether you've done well or badly, because you have no standard to judge it by. I know certainly after first year, I lay awake at night, thinking, going over the paper, well I failed that one and I failed that one, and I failed that one. And I hadn't failed any of them, but I 'knew' I had failed them.***

Seamus, although much younger than Fiona, experienced the same underestimation of his abilities when it came to exams.

> ***I was convinced I had failed. Convinced. I had one subject, and I was convinced I had got below 30 per cent, and I got 60 per cent.***

Others were not so fortunate. While they experienced the same kind of confusion as to how and what to study, they failed their exams. This was the case with Brendan who failed Philosophy. *'I was told it was impossible to fail Philosophy* (laughs) *just get your name on it ... I thought it was like a piece of cake. It was terrible.'*

Nora failed Politics in first year. Her difficulty was in understanding what the examiners required.

> ***I failed Politics in first year by 2 or 3 points and I didn't think I would have failed it. Because I really liked Politics, and I found it fascinating, really interesting and absorbing. I read too much in the wrong direction. And I was very surprised. I think I went off on tangents and maybe I just didn't know how to study properly. It was just that I enjoyed it. In retrospect, I didn't think you should enjoy yourself too much (laughs).***

Here we see echoes of the gap between the needs of the students and the demands of the university. It is a question of balancing what Weil (1986) called *'learner identity'*, that is self-realisation through learning, with what Fleming and Murphy (1987) referred to as *'college knowledge'*, that is knowing the demands and expectations of lecturers, and how best to meet them.

Another theme that emerged in the focus group interviews was the need for guidance and counselling. This ranges from what courses are best suited to the needs and interests of the mature student, through to how to write essays, prepare for exams and, generally, progress through university. As Margaret put it,

> ***I think people don't know what's good or they don't know how they're doing, or they're worried that they're not doing well enough. When in fact they're fine, you know, that maybe we don't know what to expect of it.***

Maeve believed that encouragement from lecturers and tutors would help relieve this pressure.

> ***I think a bit of praise wouldn't go amiss, you know (laughs). You never get praised... . You put in so much work and if you haven't studied for such a long time, and you put your heart and soul into it. God knows what personal problems you have, and you might just get a result. And sometimes it's not even the fact that it's a very good result, you don't even know it is, because you don't know how anyone else did. And if someone could just give you some feedback on how you're doing, or just give you a pat on the back. But when you don't get that, I think it would be very easy to drop out and you could be doing quite well, you don't realise.***

It is not surprising that, when asked what they feel should change in UCD regarding mature students, it was the issue of counselling and guidance that was emphasised. 'There should be more support, especially in first year,' according to Fiona. Margaret believed an exam and study orientation at the beginning of first year would help alleviate some of the stress for mature students. This would be a way of allowing mature students to understand the academic demands of the college.

> ***Maybe at the beginning of the year for first year mature students perhaps, a bit of some sort of help with exams. I think they're terrified of talking about exams at the beginning in case they'll terrify you. But in actual fact you know that's what you're there for. And I personally thought I would rather be realistic and I would like to***

> ***know what I'm facing... I'd like to think ahead and know what I might be aiming at... . Mature students could do with that actually, even if it's just a talk by somebody about focusing for exams, or maybe studying techniques.***

More ongoing guidance throughout the course was also suggested. Keith believed continuous feedback on study and essay guidelines would be particularly beneficial.

> ***I think [I'd like] some type of more continuous assessment, getting very detailed feedback on a regular basis. Like I know myself when I'm writing essays I couldn't call the mark, it's always rubbish when I hand it up. Now when I get essays back, if I do ok in it, I'd like somebody to turn around to me and say ok, you've done this, that, and the other, bad. Do you know what I mean? Really break it down, set you off on the right tracks of it.***

Conclusion

In this chapter we focussed on full-time mature applicants who gained entry into UCD. They were generally positive about their time in UCD. They appreciated the opportunity to study subjects that they found interesting, and they liked the contact they had with other students and staff. Moreover, students who manage to stay in the system tend to do well in their exams.

Woodley's claim (1984:49) that 'universities should have few qualms about increasing their mature student intake' is hard to disagree with, based on the present findings. This chapter, however, has highlighted two important issues that need to be addressed in policy and provision for mature students at UCD. The first issue relates to access. Adult learners who were successful in their applications, were as confused about admissions procedures in UCD as applicants who were unsuccessful. The criteria used to assess applications were as big a mystery to those who gained entry, as they were to those who could not gain entry. The admissions process appeared arbitrary. Even for those who were successful, then, there is very little understanding of the ways in which the university assesses their ability to cope in an academic environment.

The second issue raised by our research on mature students is accessibility. Full-time students experienced difficulties with study and essay guidelines, and were not satisfied with the guidance they received in these areas. They felt the College should pay more attention to their needs as mature students, and not treat them the same way as school leavers. There was a major sense of isolation both within the college itself and among other students. Our respondents expressed misgivings about the level of effort expended by UCD in meeting their educational needs. The challenge facing UCD in regard to mature students, then, is twofold: making the institution more accessible on the outside to mature applicants; and transforming the college on the inside to make it more accessible to those mature students who have managed to gain entry.

Chapter 5

Part-time Mature Students in UCD

The focus of this chapter is on the experiences of part-time mature students on the Modular BA programme. The course was first introduced in 1992 and was designed specifically for adult learners. Lectures take place in the evenings. Modular students pay for each course module they take. The flexible and part-time nature of the course is attractive to many adult learners who work, or have other commitments, such as families, during the day. There are 684 students registered on the part-time Modular BA programme. (See Table 5.1)

A module is a year's course in one subject. Students receive 30 credits for each module they complete. They need 240 credits to be awarded the Bachelor of Arts. Students can take a range of subjects, but they normally take 2 subjects per year for four years — 60 credits each year over 4 years.

Table 5.1: Modular BA students in UCD 1996-97

Year	Number	Per cent
First	162	24%
Second	146	21%
Third	140	20%
Fourth	149	22%
Fifth	87	13%
Total	**684**	**100%**

Source: Report to the President 1996-1997

Entry requirements for the Modular BA programme are different to those for the full-time day degree. Emphasis is placed on a strong written application. There is no priority given to applicants with good Leaving Certificate results.

Previous Research

Compared to full-time mature students, those enrolled on part-time degrees form a distinct grouping within higher education institutions. Nevertheless, previous research shows that part-time students have many similar experiences, and face similar kinds of problems as full-time students. Many of the research findings mentioned in the previous chapter can be applied to the experience of part-time students. Finance, for example, is a problem shared by both groups. In his study of nearly 3,000 part-time mature students, Bourner (1991) found that over 20 per cent experienced difficulty meeting the financial costs of higher education.

Part-time mature students also face difficulties with external commitments. Work plays a big role in their lives. Many work during the day and attend college in the evenings.

Bourner (1991:87) found that the majority of his respondents were forced to miss some of their classes because of work commitments. About half of his respondents said work commitments had created difficulties with completing readings and course work. Bourner concluded that there was a need to 'achieve flexibility in structuring part-time degree courses around work commitments' (1991:88). He did not make the same recommendation about family commitments, even though his data showed that these caused one third of his respondents to miss classes, or fail to do readings and course essays.

The Experience of Modular BA Students in UCD

A questionnaire was sent to a random sample of one hundred mature students taken from the list of those registered for the Modular BA programme at UCD. We received sixty-two responses, which is above the average response expected from a postal questionnaire. (See Table 9.1)

The social profile of mature students on the Modular BA programme was quite different from the unsuccessful applicants and those in pursuing full-time day courses. (See Table 5.2) The majority of our respondents were female (58 per cent), married, or previously married (60 per cent), and had at least one child (58 per cent). They also differed substantially in terms of age. Only 11 per cent of part-time students were under 30 years of age.

Two-thirds of our respondents had completed their Leaving Certificate, but only four in ten had fulfilled matriculation requirements. Modular BA students, like the full-time day mature students, have a history of taking education courses since they left school. The majority (72 per cent) had taken at least one course. One in four had previous experience of higher education. One in ten had a nursing qualification.

Modular BA students tend to come from upper-middle class backgrounds. Over half (52 per cent) had parents who were professionals. Only 15 per cent of parents occupied lower manual positions. However, six in ten of the respondents had parents who did not complete their Leaving Certificate. Only one in six had a parent with a third level qualification.

Almost half (48 per cent) of our respondents were in stable work situations prior to coming to UCD. The majority were still working during the day. The largest proportion (30 per cent) occupied intermediate non-manual positions involving secretarial, clerical and service industry work. Nearly one in five (19 per cent) worked in the home. Only 14 per cent had manual positions. (See Table 9.1)

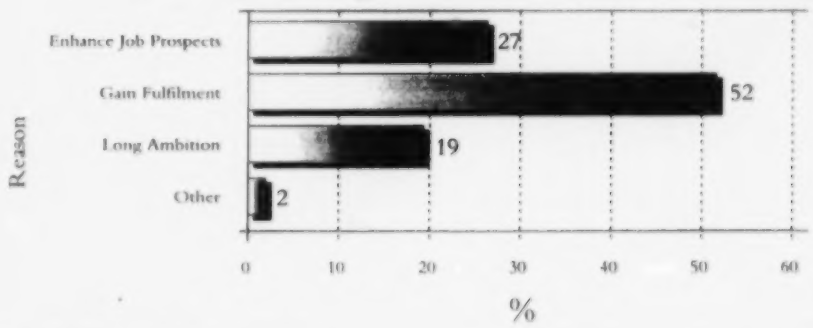
Modular BA students, then, form a distinct category among mature students. The majority work either in paid employment, or in the home. They tend to be older, female, and married with children. In comparison with day-time students and unsuccessful applicants, they tend to have less educational qualifications.

Table 5.2: A social profile of Modular BA students	
Characteristics	**Per cent**
(General)	
Female	58%
Over 30	89%
Married	60%
Has children	58%
(Education)	
Completed Leaving Certificate	67%
Did not fulfil matriculation requirements	58%
(Socio-economic status)	
Come from upper-middle class backgrounds	52%
Work in non-manual and lower-professional positions	54%

Preparing for UCD

Going to college three nights a week is a major undertaking. Unlike full-time students, Modular students have to pay fees. So what lead them to pursue a four-year degree course? The majority of respondents (52 per cent) wanted to go to college simply to gain knowledge. (See Fig. 5.1) Only a quarter (27 per cent) wanted a degree to enhance their employment opportunities. This contrasts strongly with the reasons given by full-time mature students, of which nearly two-thirds came to college for job-related reasons.

Fig. 5.1: Main reason for going to college, Modular BA students



The evening degree provides adult learners with a chance to study subjects in which they are interested in a structured environment. This was the attraction for Pauline, a 56 year-old mother with three children.

> ***[I] had enjoyed my schooldays - in later years through travelling abroad I became interested in Arts/History. I had done extra-mural courses, but felt I needed the discipline of more formal courses.***

Nearly a fifth (19 per cent) of our respondents had a long-held desire to enter university. Work and/or family commitments had prevented them from achieving this ambition. Jim who had retired from his job as a broadcaster, had a desire to *'study humanities, never having had the opportunity to do so, until now'*.

Marie, who was 26 years old and had two children, was one of the younger respondents. She came to UCD to learn, but also had enhanced career prospects in mind. She had worked in the home since she left school, and wanted to take advantage of an opportunity that she did not have previously.

> ***I didn't finish my Leaving Cert. We had great difficulties at home, not financial difficulties, but there were awful problems... . I feel I missed out in earlier years. ... Even though it is a pricey sort of exercise, I am very glad to be here. But I would be using it now for the intention for furthering my job prospects as well.***

Participants in our focus group interview believed the Modular programme presents an ideal opportunity to further the education of people who may have missed out when they were young. Siobhan, who was 46 years old and married with several children, viewed the Modular course as a form of back-door entry for those with poor Leaving Certificate results.

> ***The despair in not getting the points need not be the end of the road. There is a course there waiting for you if this is what you want to do, you will get into it. You know the Leaving Cert. isn't the end of it. There is a way back, you know, you can do it at any age.***

More than four in ten (44 per cent) of the respondents had completed an access course prior to coming to college. Over a quarter (27 per cent) of these had taken Return to Learning courses.

The Modular programme has an 84 per cent acceptance rate for mature applications. None of our respondents had experienced any difficulty in being accepted. The process is straightforward. As Eamon, a 41-year-old former manual worker, put it *'You pay your money, you get your goods.'* The Modular programme is viewed as a service to mature learners. It is seen as a privilege, but as a privilege they deserve. Niamh, who is 61 years and used to work as a manager of an insurance brokerage firm, saw it this way.

> ***I regard it as a privilege but not conferred on us by UCD. [It is] conferred on us by the system, which allows us to do this, and for which we pay our taxes. We pay taxes, we subsidise day students and we also pay our own fees. So I do regard myself as a consumer here. I think that everybody should get a good deal. We're paying for it as well as subsidising day students.***

Studying for a full-time degree was not an option for most students. Only 20 per cent had applied to the day programme. The majority (58 per cent) worked during the day, and another quarter had family responsibilities. The flexibility of the Modular programme was a major attraction for these adult learners. This was what attracted Jim.

> ***I took the Modular because I was able to do it by modules, and I could take a rest half way through, or either pursue a subject one at a time and increase it to two if I could bear that load.***

Experience of Modular BA students

Modular students, like full-time students, enjoy learning in university. They enjoy the opportunity of meeting lecturers, tutors and other mature students. Almost one third (31 per cent) saw this social contact as the most enjoyable aspect of UCD. (See Table 5.3) As the Modular programme takes place in the evening, they have little contact with day students. Consequently, unlike full-time students, age difference was not a concern. If

anything, they enjoyed the companionship of people their own age and the atmosphere in the college at night. As Claire, a 42 year-old mother, explained,

> ***the atmosphere here at night is completely different. If you're over here during the day... I mean personally I wouldn't like that. It's nothing to do even with the age, it's just the complete kind of mania of the whole thing. It's a completely different atmosphere (laughs) It's so busy during the day... Night-time is not so busy.***

The least enjoyable aspect of college for part-time students is the difficulties they experience in balancing the demands of college with work or family commitments. Nearly a third (29 per cent) did not like this aspect of being a student. This balancing act is well documented in previous research. Meeting the demands of the College can cause problems in relationships with partners and children. Although Niamh feels she has an *'exceptional partner,'* she has witnessed the problems that being in college creates for other students in their personal lives.

> ***I studied with Modular students who didn't have [family support]... . When we were in first year and I remember sort of being lost to tears because the attitude of the partner or spouse was, 'if you want to do this, you're on your own. Don't let it interfere with family life'.***

Table 5.3: Most/least enjoyable aspects of college, Modular BA students

Most Enjoyable	No.	%	Least Enjoyable	No.	%
Learning	30	49%	Age Difference	2	3%
Social Contact	19	31%	Course Load	10	17%
Staff	10	17%	External Commitments	17	29%
Other	2	3%	Financial	6	10%
Total	**61**	**100**	Course Structure	7	12%
			Facilities	9	15%
			Other	8	14%
			Total	**59**	**100**

Missing = 1 Missing = 3

Yvonne is in Third Year, married with children. She wondered what kind of impact being at college has had on her family.

> ***You see, your family have to co-operate, but they're not actually getting anything back. [The] family co-operates when you go to work, well there's extra cash. But you're going out and they're all co-operating. And ok you've got your exams, you know, well, so what, there's nothing there for them.***

Siobhan's children wondered why she was at college in the evening. Niamh had an extended family that said to her 'are you mad?' There is awareness among students on the Modular programme that their time in UCD makes heavy demands on their families. This is especially true for the women with whom we talked. Eamon was a man who understood the problem. He described himself as a 'house-husband' who appreciated the help and encouragement of his wife and children.

> ***It is a combined family effort. I couldn't have done this without my wife's help and encouragement, not to mention her financial contribution to my fees. I've given up a lot, my children have given up a lot.***

The amount of work that is required on the Modular programme is another unfavourable aspect. One in seven of our respondents said the course load was stressful. Jim felt the course was over-loaded.

> ***I get the impression in the Modular that it's very condensed and that we have to rush. I'm only speaking from my own experience, that from September to December, we have to crush in an awful lot, listen to a lot of lectures, absorb a lot of information, do three or four essays, and then straight in immediately after Christmas to do an exam. And then you're on totally different subjects then from December to May.***

Struggling with finances also played a role in the respondents' enjoyment of the course. One in ten felt their financial situation had a negative impact on their progress. For some, having to pay for the course added to the stress of studying. Those who experienced financial difficulties found ways to cut costs in other areas. As Marie put it, 'other things have to go sometimes.' Jim believed that 'something has to give' when it comes to paying fees. Claire pointed out that there were hidden costs of going to third level.

> ***You could get involved in babysitting, or childcare, or petrol, you know it all mounts up, all this extra money. It can amount to up to £20, £30 a week on babysitting and petrol, just stuff like that, you know. And it can be a huge financial strain, much more than your fees and your books.***

A significant proportion of Modular students had problems with the facilities, and the overall structure of the course. Almost one in seven (15 per cent) of the respondents found the facilities in UCD to be the least enjoyable part of student life. Marie felt that she was not getting what she paid for. She had encountered difficulties in gaining access to computers in her first year class.

> ***Our lecturer told us that hopefully at the end of the term now we should have two two hour sessions in the computer building, but she doesn't know if that's going to happen. They're not sure whether they can facilitate us. They're four hours a year... I really was furious about that, four hours. And they're sort of humming and hawing, and not quite sure, and you know, really I don't think that's much to ask, considering ... you are paying. I mean, for me personally, it's an awful strain to actually come up with the goods for the fees, you know, and it is, it's very hard to take, sometimes.***

Modular students appeared to cope well with exams. Almost seven in ten (69 per cent) received honours in their first year exams. (See Table 5.4) None of the respondents who replied to our questionnaire had failed an exam. Although this is slightly distorted since some students only take one subject in first year, it indicates a high level of commitment and motivation among Modular students. As Eamon said,

> ***we're a lot more focussed, a lot more dedicated, and what I can see of my peers over the years ehm, most of us have albeit scraped, but certainly the majority of us got through our exams.***

Table 5.4: First year exam results of Modular BA students

Results	Number	Per cent
All Honours	34	69%
Honours/Passes	4	8%
All Passes	11	23%
Total	**49**	**100%**

Missing = 13

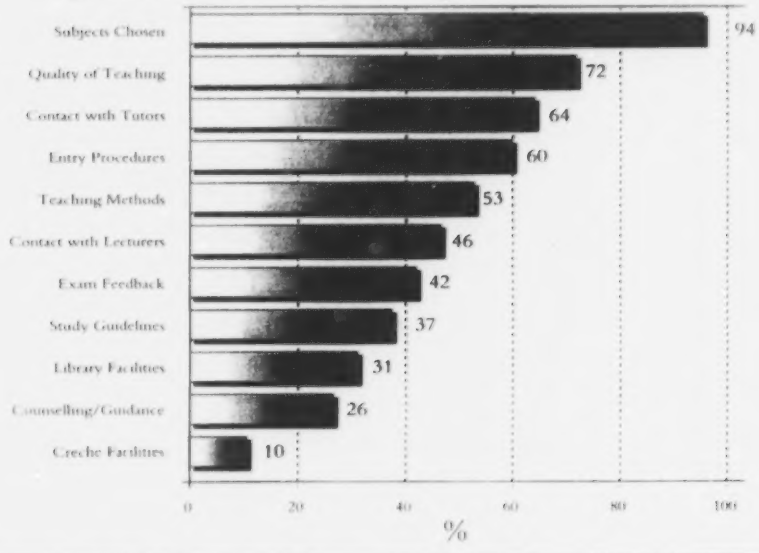
Experience of the Course

The majority (94 per cent) of our respondents were satisfied with their subjects. (See Fig. 5.2) They were satisfied with the teaching methods and the quality of the teaching in UCD. On the negative side, as with day students, there was a low level of satisfaction with study guidelines, counselling and feedback from examinations.

Respondents were also dissatisfied with the level of contact they had with lecturers. More than half (54 per cent) were not satisfied with the amount of time they spend with their lecturers. Specifically, modular students wanted to have tutorials with lecturers. Niamh felt that this was a significant issue.

> ***I sort of felt, for instance, on the matter of tutoring, I feel that modular students especially come at the bottom of the list. Day students for instance get to have tutorials with their lecturers. That never happens with modular students. I can understand the reasoning, that chaps can't be, or women can't be in at night and during the day I suppose, but I think we should be as entitled to our lecturers for tutors as [day students].***

Fig. 5.2: Satisfaction* with aspects of college, Modular BA students



** indicates response of satisfied or very satisfied*

Some participants in our focus group discussion believed that modular students are not treated as well as day students. They felt that this was because the Modular BA programme was not supported adequately by the institution. Niamh broached this issue with the College and had received a negative response.

> ***It's my fourth year in UCD and I remember at the beginning, sort of suggesting to one of the departments, that we felt we were consumers and we weren't getting what we were paying for effectively. And we got a very negative response to that, very negative. I mean we were told almost that we were lucky to be here.***

Siobhan agreed with Niamh. She felt that there was not enough consideration given to the difficulties faced by Modular students.

> ***You feel that you're not getting a fair deal, but maybe you're getting the same kind of deal [as day students]. Maybe, there's a lack of care for the day students, you know... I'm in a department, and one of the things we were kind of put out about, was we didn't get enough notice about exams, say on a particular night. Some people might be working or be away on business... you heard maybe two weeks before, if that. You know, there's no scheduling in. At the start of the year they should take into consideration that people have other commitments.***

The consensus among the focus group participants was that there was a certain lack of care in the College for modular students. For Claire, this lack of care manifested itself in a small, but significant, detail for adult learners.

> ***I spent like an hour and three-quarters trying to have a project submitted to be accepted. And the realisation was that, I didn't have an hour and three-quarters.***

This lack of consideration was echoed by Jim, who felt the day students received a much better service.

> ***We get the feeling that we're not being treated on the same basis as day students. First of all we are paying... a great deal of money which the day students are not. We get tutorials only every fortnight, and we have limited time in which we can access the library.***

This perception that they do not receive the service they pay for, and the belief that the college exhibits a lack of care towards them, adds to the perception that the Modular degree is worth less than the day degree. As Eamon put it, *'you're stereotyped... . Now I'm quite happy with my modular degree, but a lot of people aren't. It's considered to be a second-class Arts degree.'* It is a perception that also exists outside the college, according to Nicole; *'Among the general public, I mean it's just the people I've met, but when you say you're going by night, it's kind of, oh, is that really a proper degree?'* In fact, Niamh would have preferred to do a day degree, because of the assumed lack of worth of the Modular degree.

The lack of consideration for Modular students, and a lack of status for the Modular degree, are key issues, but our participants emphasised many positive aspects about UCD and the Modular programme. They felt that lecturers enjoyed and respected the Modular students' contribution to the college. As Pauline put it, *'they've always appreciated [us]. They probably realised, we do put in a lot of effort. We want to be here and we're prepared to work at it'*. Siobhan was also positive about their relationship with lecturers. She had *'always been very appreciative of lecturers... when they say they like having mature students in the college'*.

Another very positive aspect is the built-in flexibility of the course. This is one of the main reasons why some mature students opted for the Modular programme in the first place. As Pauline explained, 'one thing I found good when I came in, at the start, was the flexibility to be able to pick and choose yourself.' Modular students, within limits, can pick and choose their subjects, and can take only one subject if they wish. Niamh benefited from this aspect.

> ***I started English, but I couldn't do the History and English together, I found the reading list much too heavy, so I chucked [it]. I did the first year English and went on to Greek and Roman. But it is a very heavy load, so it's a great facility to be able to do that.***

Participants appreciated the support of staff and the in-built flexibility of the programme. Most of all they appreciated the opportunity to gain a degree from UCD. Eamon took a broader perspective.

> ***It is a relatively new concept [Modular BA] isn't it anyway? I mean it's only in the last six years that it has happened, and there are bound to be a lot of teething problems, and they're very irritating. But the fact that we can do this is great.***

When asked what changes they thought should be made in the Modular programme, there was general agreement — as with day students — that continuous assessment would be a positive and much-needed inclusion in the course structure. Eamon believed this would help 'take that dreadful edge' from exams. Niamh said she would like to see 25 per cent of her overall grade based on essays done outside of examinations. She said it would have benefited her when she suffered a family bereavement during the examinations.

> ***I had done very well in my essays and I went in and I made a dog's breakfast and there was no use. I went in there one day and she [her mother] was very bad, and I didn't know my name or address. I wrote rubbish, I know I did, but that's just the luck of the draw. But if I had a little in the bag it would have been a great help.***

Jim said he would like to see continuous assessment in the form of feedback from tutors. 'There should be consultation at least with the tutors in relation to the results of the students' exams or essays during the year, to give some idea as to their standard or their quality'.

Another aspect of the programme they would like changed is the credit given to prior learning. Specifically, they would like to see a clear description of what courses can be credited and in which departments. Jim experienced confusion over this aspect of modular provision.

> ***I had previously done a B.Comm many years ago, and I tried to get credit for... . economics. They wouldn't pay any attention to me, they said economics in Arts is quite different from economics in the Commerce Faculty.***

Conclusion

In this chapter we focussed on part-time mature students enrolled on the Modular BA programme in UCD. This group forms a distinct entity within both the Arts programme and the College as a whole. They are evening students, and as such have little contact with the bulk of the student population. They are divorced from the day-time atmosphere and the traditional forms of day-to-day contact with staff. They are also distinct from full-time mature students in terms of personal characteristics. They tend to be older, married, female and have children. They tend to have less educational qualifications. They are also more likely to be presently employed outside of college. One major difference to full-time students is that they have to pay fees. Because of this, they perceive the College in service terms, and see themselves not so much as students, but as customers. As with full-time

students, they enjoy learning their chosen subjects, and the contact with other students and staff. Mature students on the Modular programme also tend to do well in exams.

There are some mixed messages that emerge from our research. Respondents to our survey and participants in our focus group interview were generally pleased and appreciative of the Modular programme. However, they had difficulties balancing the demands of college with those of work and family. There was also a general feeling that they were somehow second class students, that UCD did not recognise and accept their special needs and interests, that there were insufficient support structures, and that the final degree was not perceived to be as good as a standard BA.

Although Modular students, compared to full-time students, did not experience the same problems as regards access, they share many of the same difficulties when it comes to the accessible nature of UCD. Possibly their experience of these difficulties is more acute, as they pay fees. But the findings in this chapter confirm the impression that mature students have their own specific needs where college and academic life are concerned.

Chapter 6

Mature Students who Graduated

In previous chapters, we talked about the efforts people had made to prepare for college. For many students, studying for a degree has been a long-held ambition. We also saw the kinds of problems and difficulties faced by mature students once they enter university. The questions that we examine in this chapter are: How do former students now feel about their experiences in UCD? What are their more mature, critical reflections about the time they spent here? What have they been doing since they finished? We felt that graduates could offer insights into the struggle of mature students to negotiate the academic demands of the College, and to balance these with personal, work, and family commitments. Graduates could reflect from a distance on issues of access and accessibility in higher education, and how university life and their degree have benefited them. We could also compare and contrast their experiences to those of mature students who did not complete their degrees.

In 1993, 47 mature students entered full-time degree programmes. (See Table 6.1) Of these, 37 (79 per cent) have completed their degrees, and 10 (21 per cent) withdrew. Although the figures are small, it indicates that UCD has a problem retaining mature students. Science, in particular, does not appear to have a good completion record, with only half of its mature students finishing their course. We will return to these issues of non-retention in the next chapter.

Table 6.1: Class of 1993 completion/withdrawal rate by Faculty

Faculty	Withdrew (21%)	Completed (79%)	
	No.	No.	No.
Agriculture	1	4	5
Engineering/Architecture	0	1	1
Arts	5	18	23
Commerce	0	0	0
Law	1	6	7
Science	2	2	4
Social Science	1	6	7
Total	**10**	**37**	**47**

Source: Admissions Office, UCD

Previous Research

Mature graduates' experience of leaving college: There are conflicting reports regarding the experience of mature graduates from higher education. Baines' (1986:15) study found that leaving was a stressful period for many mature students. As Metcalf (1993:15) put it, mature students experience 'a more acute sense of loss than for the standard a student.' The passage into employment was also difficult. According to Metcalf, mature students 'experienced discrimination from employers and difficulties in finding jobs' (1993:15). However, in another study of English mature graduates, Woodley (1991) found that the passage was much smoother. Woodley asked if prospective mature students should be optimistic about their future. He found that the majority of past students felt that they had benefited from their courses, and had embarked on the kinds of careers they wanted (Woodley,1991:104).

From their study of 285 Australian women/mother graduates, Burns *et al* concluded that,

> ***today's mature age female graduates emerge... as career committed, satisfied in their jobs and mostly employed in positions with career potential and moderate to good salaries (1993:45).***

Destinations of mature graduates: Like the literature on the experience of leaving university, the reports on general career destinations for mature graduates can appear conflicting at first. For example, Gallagher *et al* (1993:12) found that the destinations of mature graduates were not too different from those of traditional students. The proportion of graduates aged 25 and over entering permanent employment directly after graduating was 60 per cent, very similar to equivalent figures for younger students. In Smithers and Griffin's study of Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) universities (1986), half of the mature graduates took up permanent employment, thirty per cent engaged in further education and training, while 20 per cent went on to research/academic study. Burns *et al's* study of Australian women graduates (1993:39) found that '80 per cent of them had been always employed since graduation, their current occupational status was moderate to high, and job satisfaction was high'.

Also on a positive note, Mischler's study of 441 adult graduates from the University of Wisconsin (1983:219) found that there was a dramatic increase in the number of people employed full-time after graduation.

> ***Before the degree, about half of the adults were employed in professional, technical and managerial positions, while after the degree this percentage increased to 84 per cent (1983:227).***

In terms of mature graduates perceptions, large percentages in Mischler's study 'noted several job related changes that occurred directly as a result of having the degree' (1983:213). These were generally positive changes. Tarsh's (1989) study of new graduate destinations, however, found the opposite to be true. He carried out an analysis of the first destinations of 1987 British graduates, and concluded that older graduates 'fare consistently worse than younger graduates. The difference is not dramatic but it is clear' (1989:597). Tarsh suggested that the main reason for this difference between traditional and mature students was subject choice. Mature students tend to opt for subjects within the Social Science and Humanities disciplines. It is not surprising, then, that a disproportionate number of mature students enter public sector employment, particularly teaching (Smithers and Griffin,1986:130; Graham,1989:54; Woodley 1991:107; Burns *et al*,1993:45). But as Tarsh pointed out, the supply of jobs in the public sector was not large enough to satisfy the demand from mature graduates.

Apart from subject choice, age and gender are two other variables that appear to affect mature graduate destinations. Tarsh (1989:591) found that 'the proportions of graduates who were either unemployed or in short-term work rose with age'. Graham (1989) also analysed 1987 British figures for graduate destinations, and provided a more detailed account of the influence of age on destination. She divided mature graduates into three age groups, 25 to 29 years, 30 to 49 years, and those aged 50 and over. Generally speaking, the 25-29 age group made similar employment choices to those under 25 years. However, for mature graduates in the 30-49 category, employment prospects began to worsen. There was a tendency 'for the proportions going into employment to diminish slightly and the percentages remaining unemployed or being unavailable for work to increase towards the upper end of the age bracket' (Graham,1989:53).

In the 50 years and over category, the destinations were quite distinct from the other age groups. The pattern of unemployment set in the previous age group tended to worsen, but there was also a substantial number of students who had retired, or were otherwise unavailable for employment.

Another variable to have an effect on occupational destination was gender. Graham (1989:54) provided a general account of the differences between men and women when it comes to graduate destination.

> ***Women of all ages are less likely than men to enter employment directly after graduation or to undertake further academic study, though a higher proportion of women than of men take up teacher training and other vocational postgraduate courses. More women than men enter temporary employment and declare themselves unavailable for work.***

Gallagher *et al* (1993:12) also concluded that more women tend to enter public sector employment such as teaching. And although Burns *et al* were generally upbeat about the opportunities of mature women graduates, they concluded that these women were 'clustered in the teaching and helping professions and, by and large, likely to agree that their jobs are traditionally female' (1993:45).

Mischler put a positive perspective on the entry of women into public sector, and traditionally female, employment. She argued (1983:219) that the degree gained by women in her study allowed for a major change in their employment status from homemaker to being full-time employed. The change was from 54 per cent prior to commencing to 78 per cent after completing a degree.

Mature Graduates in UCD

A questionnaire was sent to all mature students who had completed degrees in UCD since 1992. This gave us a population of 95; of these 54 questionnaires were returned. This gave a response rate of 57 per cent. We present here a summary of the results from our survey (See Table 9.1 for more detailed findings).

The profile of mature graduates is similar to that of full-time undergraduate mature students. They have no children (59 per cent), and mature graduates were more likely to be female (72 per cent). (See Table 6.2).

Mature graduates tended to have completed their Leaving Certificate (86 per cent) and to have fulfilled matriculation requirements (74 per cent). Like mature students generally, the majority (74 per cent) had taken courses since they left school. A large proportion of these (40 per cent) had previous experience of higher education. Another 18 per cent had professional qualifications.

Nearly one third (31 per cent) had parents who went to college. Mature graduates tended to come from middle-class backgrounds (63 per cent). Nearly a quarter (23 per cent) had parents with higher professional occupations. Only a third of the graduates had parents with manual occupations.

Table 6.2: A Social profile of mature graduates

Characteristics	Per cent
(General)	
Female	72%
Has no children	59%
(Education)	
Completed Leaving Certificate	86%
Fulfilled matriculation requirements	74%
(Socio-economic status)	
Comes from middle-class background	63%
Works in lower-professional positions	59%

Preparing for UCD

The most common reason given by four in ten of our respondents for why they went to college was to enhance job opportunities. (See Fig. 6.1) Gaining knowledge and fulfilment was mentioned by over a third (38 per cent). As with current full-time mature students, graduates were more likely to say that they came to college to improve their employment prospects. This reaffirms the earlier finding that part-time Modular BA students are different in that the majority return to study to gain knowledge.

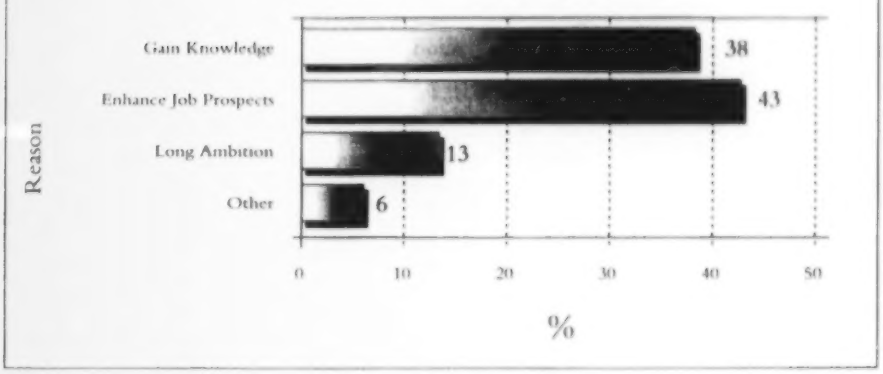
We carried out two focus groups with mature graduates. Eleven of our survey respondents participated. It was clear from our discussions that the completion of a degree was the culmination of a lengthy process. This process began with their entry into adult education. Adult education courses such as return to learning, skills-based courses or foundation programmes, provided students with the confidence to undertake a degree programme. Elaine is 42 and married with children. She had been taking courses for many years prior to coming to UCD: *'I did the University Foundation course down in Pearse College, and before that, I did loads of extra-mural courses, liberal arts, things from there'*. Alison, who is 58 years old and separated, also took a foundation course. She recounted the lead-up to taking a degree, and how the National College of Industrial Relations (NCIR) provided a solid foundation for college.

I'd left school at 14, and I got married when I was 18, and I had 10 children. And hadn't gone back to education until '92, and did an extra mural studies course here at UCD at night, just one evening a week. And then the following year I did Psychology, an extra-mural course as well. And then I started in NCIR. But without the year in NCIR where we were taught how to compose an essay and reference an essay, I couldn't have got through college without it. Because I wouldn't have had an idea.

When asked why they thought they were successful in gaining entry to college, participants pointed to these courses as important additions to their applications. Peter, in his late forties, had taken an access course, but felt that he had something else to offer as qualification for entry.

I was able to say in my letter, I've taken 6 extra-mural courses at UCD over the past 2-3 years, possibly more. And I was also able to present them with certain things I'd been doing in my past life, like involvement in community arts, involved with local journalism, stuff like that...

Fig. 6.1: Mature graduates:
Main reason for going to college



For Elaine, the process of preparing for college had also begun many years previously. Elaine is slightly different. A working class mother in her 40s, she and others involved in adult education in Dublin had attempted to persuade the universities to come out to them. It was an early attempt to develop an outreach programme.

We tried our best to get the university out to us, you know. At that time, all our children were younger, and we had an interview with someone from Trinity College... . [the idea was] that the lecturers would come out to us, we'd have them on tape or something. It's very elitist, the way it is in UCD. It'd be sort of Open University... if the universities come to us, rather than us having to go to university.

Elaine and the other participants were surprised when they were offered places in UCD. Elaine said she was 'shocked' to receive an offer, and rang the college *'four times just to make sure'* they had not made a mistake with her application form. Some were shocked because they had been turned down by UCD before. Jean, another married woman, was devastated by the first rejection from UCD. *'I was very angry, very hurt about it. It was like a death, literally, because I had discovered learning again'.*

Although it was at least three years ago, people remembered quite well what the admissions procedure was like. They also remembered how curious they were as to why they were accepted and others were not given places. A recurring theme in this report is the nature of the admissions process in UCD. Jean had the experience of being both rejected and accepted by UCD. Several years on, she expresses disquiet over the process.

> ***To me it seemed like they took it out of a hat... . And I applied the second time and I just kept my fingers crossed, and I had absolutely no hopes really. I had come up to speak to one of the professors to ask him, because I was so disappointed the first time... . And he said that when the next CAO form came around, he'd give me a bit of advice and that's what he did. And maybe he just remembered me I don't know, but I got in.***

A similar experience happened to Cathy, a married woman in her late forties. She applied and was rejected, and then applied again and was accepted. She sent exactly the same application form, with the same material.

> ***How do they do it? There's no interview, they don't know me. I'm just a bit of information on a piece of paper that they've had twice, refused once, and accepted the second time. So I was very curious at the end of the show. What was their criteria, who sat down and read it, who said yes, who said no, and why.***

Breda, who was employed as a nurse before she applied, was surprised to discover how many applicants were rejected. It made her question why she got in with her lack of formal qualifications.

> ***I mean, I'm thinking, why the hell did they pick me? You know, I mean I didn't have anything. So that's why I'm a bit sceptical about that. I feel a lot of it must be to a point random, you know, luck of the draw. I don't think, or maybe I'm wrong, they actually go through 600 forms in detail... . I had actually heard if you're a mature student, you'd automatically get into UCD.***

Experience of the Course

Mature graduates had mixed responses when asked to reflect on the undergraduate experience in UCD. Like the Modular BA students in the previous chapter, those who completed were very satisfied with the subjects they chose for their degree. (See Fig. 6.2) The majority also valued the teaching on offer in UCD. But mature graduates were not happy with the contact they had with lecturers and tutors in the university. They were also unhappy with facilities such as the library and créche. Exam feedback and study guidelines scored very low satisfaction levels. Again, there was also dissatisfaction expressed about the lack of guidance and counselling services.

All our respondents said that they would recommend undertaking a degree to other adult learners. At the same time, their experience was a mixed one. Some thoroughly enjoyed the degree course. Elaine was one of these.

> ***I loved the place, I felt like the Pope, kissing the ground when I walked in, and I always loved it... . I would have loved to have done everything. I mean to get that Arts book [prospectus], God, it's a treasure chest. I wanted to do everything.***

Nevertheless, some were disappointed with their academic experience. Karen, a middle-aged woman who completed an Arts degree *'felt very isolated and like a freak'* when she was studying for her degree. Others like Alison *'loved'* the course although she felt the workload

was stressful. It was a similar experience for Ruth, another Arts student. She had worked as an occupational therapist prior to coming to college and, although she liked her subjects, she found the course work overbearing and confusing at times.

> ***It was good, but it was stressful, and certainly for me, I just didn't know at any stage, particularly in the first year, what level I was actually at, what was expected of me, and then what level I was functioning at. So first year exams were a complete nightmare... . I had absolutely no idea whether I was functioning on pass level or anything.***

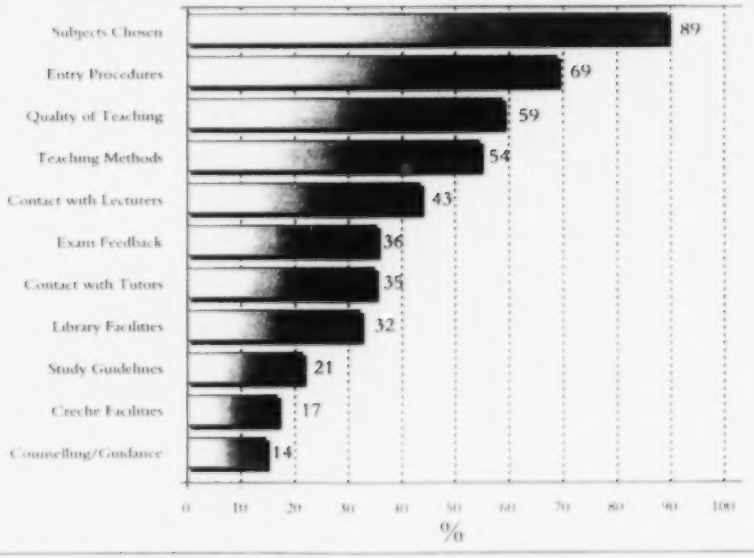
We noted previously that a major issue for current mature students was the academic culture of the university. Many adults who come to college experience difficulties in understanding the demands placed on them by departments and lecturers, particularly in relation to reading, essays and studying for exams. They felt that this leaves them at a disadvantage in comparison with traditional students. As Jean put it; *'we had no gauge like, the younger kids coming straight from the Leaving [Certificate], they sort of have it, they already have it in their brain'.*

Una is one of the younger mature students. She is 28 and took a degree in Science. She had a good grasp of the differences between mature and younger students in terms of their ability to cope with academic life. She felt that mature students *'do too much.'* Traditional entry students, having just taken exams prior to entry, understand the distinction between doing enough and doing too much.

> ***[students in the Leaving Certificate] they're still on that wheel, of ehm, okay lets do the shortest amount of material to pass the exam, and you go in and you learn... . No lecturer will ever tell you that.***

Breda, who is also young, also experienced difficulty grappling with academic demands and structures. With the benefit of hindsight, she believed a foundation course of some type would have been of benefit in this regard.

Fig. 6.2: Satisfaction with aspects of college, mature graduates



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

> ***I could never understand why for the whole three years, everything was so crammed, why you needed to get so much information. I mean, I used to think maybe I should have done an introductory course to university, and maybe I would have been better, I'd be more clued in, as to what was beneficial, and what I needed to do, and how much. And I would have been able to pace myself better instead of cramming half the time and reading loads and loads.***

Some of the mature graduates we talked to felt tutorials were an opportunity to get to grips with this learning aspect of the university. Only a third of our mature graduates were satisfied with their contact with tutors. According to Alison, tutors *'are very important, particularly in First Year.'* Cathy agreed.

> ***I always felt the tutorials, the actual structure between our lectures and our tutorials, I always felt tutorials weren't what I wanted them to be... I felt that was our time to talk to [tutors], and they were continually feeding us more information.***

Again, the issue of being singled out by tutors during tutorials was a problem for some mature graduates. This problem adds to the dissatisfaction with the lack of tutor contact. Jean felt she spoke for other mature students, especially those of her generation.

> ***Every mature student I've ever met has said exactly the same thing, they [tutors] look straight at you when they're asking a question, and you come from a generation where you just don't not answer, whether you know it or not, and you're just too polite not to answer. So you end up doing all the talking...I actually said it to a few tutors, please don't look at me, or [instead] say a name...***

The previous chapters outlined the privilege mature students felt by being in university and studying for a degree. The mature graduates also talked about this privilege, and felt there is a greater recognition among mature students of the privilege of going to college. As Una put it,

> ***I think it's got to do with age and maturity, you come to the stage where you realise you really do appreciate education and what it can do for you... you're so excited at being here.***

There was also a belief that mature students are under pressure to justify themselves while studying for a degree, especially among those who entered on the grounds of mature years. According to Alison, mature students *'put themselves under pressure'*. The fact that there are so few mature students in UCD adds to this sense of responsibility. Jean is one graduate who felt this pressure, and also perceived it from some members of staff: *'I felt I had to justify my place ... you really feel you've got to justify your existence'*.

Una did her degree in Science and the very low mature student intake placed similar pressure on her to succeed.

> ***The more we succeed, obviously there are going to be more places available, so we don't know, if I fail, that could decrease the places. And so I mean there is a serious responsibility... we have to do well to open the doors.***

Mature graduates were not satisfied with the counselling they received as undergraduates. Only 14 per cent were happy with the guidance on offer. This particularly applied to the learning process they went through while at college. There was awareness among mature

graduates that there was a stock of knowledge and skills they needed to learn in order to get their degree. They were never informed of the importance of these skills to their learning. Some felt that there was a veil of silence regarding these issues, which put mature students in a confusing and difficult position. Jean believed that this silence was for the benefit of younger students, but to the detriment of adults who had been out of the system for a long time.

> ***I think it's geared to make young students work harder, where really mature students should be told to work less harder. And nobody tells you that, they're too conscientious.***

Una agreed, believing that the lecturers would never explain the *'tricks of the trade'* involved in academic life. She felt that some kind of orientation should be introduced to help mature students cope. She recommended a *'shadow'* system, whereby another mature student who is already in the system would show newcomers the university, and explain to them what it entails. Jean would like something of this nature at the beginning of the course.

> ***One thing that annoyed me, so much could have been made so much easier with just a little bit of thought, maybe a 20 minute chat, and so many things could have been easier... For a start, they could have said, look don't study everything... .***

Ruth felt that a liaison person from the college staff would help alleviate some of the difficulties faced by mature students. There was then, among mature graduates, a widely held perception that mature students need more counselling especially in the area of study skills and course load.

It should be remembered, however, that although these students were unhappy with this aspect of college, they were the successful ones who completed their degrees. And they were delighted when they finally received their degrees. Breda felt she had achieved something worthwhile and enjoyed the symbolism of graduation day.

> ***I felt it was a great achievement at the end of the three years. And after each year when I knew I had passed and I was okay to go to the next year, it was a good feeling. On graduation day I was as proud as punch, with my black hat on and the cape. And I felt that day that I had really achieved something that I suppose at times during the three years I thought, God would I ever get through. It was very stimulating... to be actually using your brain-cells, just learning and doing something completely different.***

Although Peter found the course load difficult, he spoke of the pleasure in achieving a degree.

> ***I loved every minute of it, hated having essays in, but the day that I graduated I was drunk all day... I was on this incredible high all day.***

Outcomes: What They are Doing Now

As we can see in Table 6.3, mature students gained similar results to the broad student body, with the majority (77 per cent) gaining second class degrees. It should be pointed out nearly half (48 per cent) gained a first or upper second class honours degree. These results are in line with previous research findings, in which mature students tend to do as well or better in exam results and level of degrees obtained.

Table 6.3: Final exam results, mature graduates		
Class of Award	**Number**	**Per cent**
1st	3	6%
2.1	19	42%
2.2	16	35%
3rd	4	9%
Pass	3	6%
Other	1	2%
Total	**46**	**100**

Missing = 8

Table 6.4 outlines what mature graduates have been doing since they finished college. Nearly a half (47 per cent) have continued with their studies. Of those who are studying, two-thirds (67 per cent) are enrolled on higher degrees (Higher Diploma or Masters).

Over a third (36 per cent) of mature graduates have entered or returned to employment. The majority of these are currently employed in professional positions. Three of our respondents said they were unemployed, while four said they were working in the home.

When talking to graduates who have entered or returned to employment, we found there to be mixed feelings when it came to the benefit of their degree. Cathy believed the degree helped get her a job. She believed that although she was older than many other graduates seeking employment, the degree added status to her CV.

> ***I've just started work, and I haven't worked in the workforce for 23 years... I saw people around me, young people around me with degrees and going and getting decent jobs and then MAs getting decent jobs. And I sort of said yes this should stand by me for getting a decent sort of job. And I was a bit fearful about my age, and I thought how can I hide that in my CV, but you can't... But I ignored that anyway and always sort of have and I just keep going. And it didn't interfere then at the end of the day. And yes, I had the confidence then and I felt, yeah, a BA has got to count for something... I think I got the job because I showed that I had spent three years seriously working hard, for somebody who's been out of the workforce for so long. And then I had a personal background to do business. But yeah, I got a good job and I don't think perhaps I would have been taken seriously, or I don't think I would have put myself forward.***

Table 6.4: Present activity, mature graduates		
Activity	**Number**	**Per cent**
Working	19	36%
Unemployed	3	6%
Homemaker	4	7%
Studying	25	47%
Other	2	4%
Total	**53**	**100**

Missing = 1

Breda returned to nursing after she gained her degree. She is now working in a different capacity but, she said, this had nothing to do with her degree. In fact, she felt that the degree on its own would not gain her a decent-paying job. It was only near the end of the course, that she realised she needed to gain a further qualification.

> ***When I finished the BA, I felt that I need something a lot more than a BA before I'll get a job with a decent pay. I mean you could probably start at £9,000 or whatever. But say the job had respectable pay, right, and then I went and did the BA. I felt sure I'm not going to get a job, there's so many people out there looking for jobs and the standard is so much higher now, you're going to need to do a post-grad, of you know a masters or else something else... I did a BA and after the end of it, I said damn it, what the hell did I do these subjects for, I'm not going to get a job. But I only realised that when I was near the end of the BA, you know. I knew that I wouldn't get a job straight away with a degree, a BA degree, I knew that I'd have to do a post-grad.***

Elaine classified herself as unemployed, and was frustrated at her inability to gain paid employment. She felt that her previous status as a housewife and mother are a deterrent to employers.

> ***I've been finding it hard trying to get a job, I was trying community sort of stuff, but ehm, I think it's because I've been a housewife, and looking after my children that nobody's interested. And I've applied to get onto these CE [Community Employment] schemes but nobody's interested because I'm a kept woman (laughs) It's terrible. And I mean there's all these brilliant jobs, helping out libraries, teaching assistant, I would love to do part-time which you can do with your degree... .***

Elaine was delighted at having finally finished her degree. Looking back, however, she feels that she wasn't prepared for life after graduation.

> ***You're up on a high when you finish and you get your degree, and there's nothing, you're just left up there. And you can't go back to where you were before, I don't want to go back to where I was before. But there's no opportunities there for me at all.***

Some of the people we talked to are currently enrolled in Master's programmes at UCD. Compared to the degree, they find the programme even more isolating and time consuming than their undergraduate degree. This was Alison's experience.

> ***I found it very difficult [doing the Masters] as opposed to the degree... the Masters is a completely different ball game, the lectures are very intense, the work is all about analysis, and I'm not very good at analysing other people's work. I don't like criticising anything anyone else has written, because I think it's pretty tough to write something.***

While Alison is taking a course-based Masters, Ruth is registered on the two-year research Masters. She misses the contact with other students.

> ***I actually find working at home on my thesis extremely difficult, it's much easier with the interest of having to go to lectures and having everything around you...***

Apart from the benefits their degrees have brought them with regard to employment and further education, there has also been the benefit of social prestige. Mature graduates find that having a degree, influences their relationships with others. Some of this influence is very positive. According to Alison, her children treat her in a more positive way.

> ***I can help my children more with my homework now, especially my son who's sitting his Leaving Cert. And he'll ask me things because he thinks I know everything now (laughs)...They just treat you with, is it more respect, I don't know, you're not just Mum anymore, you're Mum BA (laughs)... they just come to you for help more.***

Peter illustrated this with the following story about how he got a letter published in the papers.

> ***I have been published in the newspapers over the years, but there was a specific thing about education written by Tom Mitchell, the Provost of Trinity. And I decided, The Irish Times is hard to crack, to get a letter published, and I decided to write this letter... raising one or two points... And at the end I signed Peter —, BA... In that sense there may be a certain caché.***

Una has a similar experience of her degree gaining her respect. The previous year she worked for a transport company, doing data inputting. The attitude of her manager changed when he discovered she had studied Science.

> ***I found the manager's attitude had changed once he knew I was in college and I did Science, it was a totally different relationship, me and him, compared to anybody else. I found that he wanted to talk to me, he was asking me what I thought of the office, how would I change it. And I was going wow, this is amazing, I would never have been asked that, 4 or 5 years ago as a lab technician in a laboratory. There's a certain attitude, people take you more seriously.***

These were some of the positive changes that have occurred since graduating. One of the more negative consequences of gaining a degree appears to be the effect it had on friendships. Some mature graduates experienced a deterioration in old friendships. Jean found that her female friends, and one family member reacted negatively to her going to college.

> ***I think some of your friends look at you differently too, which is not always positive... I found myself, now in the beginning I was naively bursting to tell everybody about it. But slowly as the years went on I found I spoke less and less, until I didn't want to speak about it at all... I have a sister for instance who still has not mentioned the fact that I went to college.***

Una found that having gone to college put a distance between her and her old friends back home.

> ***I know when I go home, very few of my friends have gone to college, and once you say that you're in college, conversation changes to changing nappies, and tractors and farming, everything that they're doing. So I think they feel like they're totally isolated from you, and they can't understand. 'Well, you've got everything, why do you want to do that?' And I can't understand that.***

Conclusion

This chapter examined the experiences of mature graduates from UCD. Looking back, they shared many of the same thoughts as students who are currently registered. They enjoyed their subjects and the knowledge they gained. They also enjoyed meeting other students, particularly mature students. Perhaps the most significant finding of this chapter was their assessment of personal and academic support in the college. They echoed the feelings of both full-time and part-time students in their dissatisfaction with study guidelines and academic counselling. They were able to step back from their undergraduate experience and, as a result, provided clear and eloquent statements on what they felt were foreign academic demands placed on them by the college. This hindsight resulted in mixed judgements on how they were treated by UCD. They also had mixed feelings about the benefit their degree has been to their lives since graduation.

Chapter 7

Mature Students who Withdrew from UCD

In this chapter we look at the experience of mature students who did not complete their degrees. Previous chapters on full and part-time students were concerned with UCD's success stories: those who managed to gain entry to the College and complete their degrees. This chapter provides a more balanced view of the situation of mature students in UCD. It allows us to assess what could be done to alleviate the difficulties faced by some mature students. The inability of UCD to retain a significant portion of its mature student population may also be seen as a kind of institutional failure. This chapter, then, raises questions of accessibility; what happens to students when they enter university. Understanding why mature students decide to leave a degree course can help us understand what UCD needs to do to reduce mature student attrition. Leaving a degree programme is a difficult and painful decision for any student. It is arguably more troublesome for mature students, many of whom have prepared for years to study at college. We highlight some important issues for the college, and assess the information in light of findings from other chapters.

In Chapter 6, we saw that the withdrawal rate of mature students in UCD is 21 per cent. Table 6.1 also detailed the withdrawals from each Faculty. Although the numbers are small, it does indicate that both Science and Arts have difficulties with mature student retention.

Mature students who withdraw fall into two groups: those who officially retire from the College, and those who are deemed absent by the Registrar's office. Less than a quarter (23 per cent) of the 61 withdrawals officially retired from the college. The remaining three-quarters are in the absent category. Two thirds of the mature students who withdrew from UCD did so in first year.

Previous Research

Mature students tend to do as well or better than traditional students in terms of exam results at university. As Scott *et al* (1996:233) put it, mature students 'make exceptional students who are very motivated and perform well academically'. There is evidence to suggest, however, that mature students are less likely to complete their courses than traditional students (Lucas and Ward,1985; Metzner and Bean,1987). Metcalf (1993:15), in a study of first year leavers from higher education, found that 'after standardising for sex, subject and entrance qualifications, students aged 21 or less on entry had a leaving rate of 12 per cent — compared with 19 per cent for older students'. McGivney (1996) carried out an extensive review of the literature on institutional dropout rates in Britain. She found that, while exam results are good, retention rates for mature students are lower than for standard-age students.

> ***Mature students in higher education are slightly (estimates vary between 4 and 8 per cent) more likely than standard-age students to leave a course of study early, although the performance of those who complete is generally as good if not better than that of standard-aged students (McGivney,1996:68).***

The fact that mature students are 'dropping' out without completing their courses is a problem, regardless of percentages: 'the question of why highly motivated mature age students, who have much to gain, depart before taking out their degree is of importance both to the individuals themselves and to society' (Scott et al,1996:234). High mature-student withdrawal rates can have far-reaching consequences. As Bourner (1991:103) put it,

> ***non-completion can involve a loss to the student in terms of time, money and self-esteem, and possibly also a rejection of further formal education. From the perspective of the educational system as a whole, it can involve a waste of resources. From the perspective of the course and institution, it is also clearly a problem. High rates of non-completion are often taken as an indication of poor course and/or college performance.***

Two issues need to be examined: withdrawal rates, and the reasons for leaving. Little, if anything, is known about mature-student withdrawal rates in Ireland. The only recent figure is for NUI, Maynooth, which had a mature student withdrawal rate of 8 per cent for the year 1996-97 (Fleming and Murphy,1997:31). This was not significantly larger than the overall withdrawal rate for the university (5 per cent). At the same time, 11 per cent did not sit the end of year examinations, so the figure for actual withdrawals could be higher than the retirement rate suggests.

In Britain, McGivney's analysis of the literature reveals that there are differences in institutional and sectoral withdrawal rates. These make it difficult to generalise about percentages of mature students who withdraw. There are two sources that are reliable. The first is the report published by the Department of Education and Science on leaving Rates among first year degree students (1992). The report found that while about 12 per cent of standard-age students withdrew, the figure is 19 per cent for mature students. The MORI poll of 1994 puts the figure at 15 per cent for mature students who withdraw (NIACE,1994).

Reasons for discontinuing study: The subject of attrition rates for mature students is unfortunately one of the least researched areas. When examined, it generally focuses on degree results rather than the subject of withdrawal rates. A very general finding is provided by (Gallagher et al,1993:13).

> ***Personal reasons related to work, family and health were found to account for 50 per cent of decisions to withdraw, with poor academic skills and unrealistic expectations about the demands of college accounting for most of the remaining withdrawals.***

The fact that mature students are said to leave because of personal problems or poor academic performance is not surprising. Each mature student experiences withdrawal from a course in a personal way, but this does not rule out the influence of institutional or broader social factors such as class and gender. Poor academic performance would also be assumed to be a reason for any student dropping out. Indeed, according to Bourner (1991:103-104), personal reasons could well be a cover for academic difficulties.

> ***Reasons given are likely to be rationalisations. Students who find the academic level of a course too demanding are likely to explain away their inability to cope in terms of domestic pressures such as family or work commitments.***

Secondly, mature students experience more personal problems, to do with the fact that they lead more complex lives than traditional students (Woodley,1995:46). It would be, then, unwise to discount the effect of institutional factors, other than academic demands, on student withdrawal rates. Tinto's (1975) classic study on drop-outs in higher education, which argues for a model based on a combination of motivational and institutional factors, is, according to McGivney, confirmed in studies on mature students withdrawals. 'The research evidence as a whole confirms that continuation on a course is positively associated with the degree of student involvement in institutional life' (1996:112).

McGivney concludes by arguing that, while mature students do experience more difficulties in terms of outside commitments, this should not be taken as a predictor of non-completion/withdrawal. Accordingly she argues that a more reliable measure 'would be the degree of support students receive when they enter an institution' (1996:112).

In other studies, gender and social class appear to play a role in the decision to withdraw. Both Yates and Davies (1986) and Morrissey and Irvine (1991) found that male mature students are more likely to withdraw than female mature students. McGivney's (1996:80) summation of the literature found this to be the case, as did Bourner (1991:113) in relation to withdrawls from the Open University. A possible reason, but not discussed in the literature, is the lower social status accorded to males on re-entering education. Scott *et al's* study of 118 mature age female students in Australia (1996) found that social class plays a strong role in withdrawal rates from university. As they put it (1996:249),

> ***women whose own education and previous level of employment was low tended to be also married to men who were relatively poorly educated and employed in lower status occupations. A complex of reasons for discontinuing study were associated with these social class indicators, notably lack of support from family for the mother's study, lack of money, weight of domestic responsibility and lack of knowledge or skills expected at university.***

One issue on which previous studies agree, is the importance of the first term/semester/year as a factor in withdrawal rates among mature students. According to McGivney (1996:116), a finding that is consistent across sectors and institutions 'is that the first term/semester, or year of study is crucial.' Bourner (1991:106) found that the number of mature students who withdraw from their course decreased significantly the longer the course progressed.

> ***Many new students, no doubt, experience an 'induction crisis' during the early period of their enrolment. Academically weaker students are likely to discover at a fairly early stage that they have underestimated the demands of the course. Where there is a mismatch between the course and the students' needs, this is likely to become apparent quite soon after enrolment.***

McGivney (1996:117) provides a list of reasons which she concludes are well-established for withdrawal rates;

- Inappropriate or rushed course choice
- Lack of preparedness for level of work
- Lack of background knowledge in subject
- Workload and time commitments greater than anticipated
- Lack of academic skills such as essay writing, note-taking
- Frustrated expectations (of course or institution)
- Difficulties in settling in and integrating into the life of the institution
- Lack of support from 'significant other'
- Lack of financial support

We can only view findings in a partial manner, as there is a lack of corroborating evidence from other studies on withdrawal rates.

One of the possible reasons why there is such a dearth of research on withdrawal rates is the difficulty in contacting those students who have prematurely left the system (change of address, unwillingness to co-operate). For instance, the questionnaire sent out by Scott et al, only received a response rate of 11 per cent.

Mature Students who withdraw from UCD

We sent a questionnaire to the 61 students who entered UCD since 1992 but who did not complete their degrees. We received 24 completed questionnaires, providing a 39 per cent response rate. Like the unsuccessful applicants, mature students who did not complete are more likely to have a negative experience of UCD, and therefore less likely to respond to a postal questionnaire. Given the low number of responses, the information presented should be interpreted cautiously. It does, however, shed some light on the issues faced by mature students who decided to leave without finishing their degree.

Mature students who withdrew are not too dissimilar to those who finished, particularly in terms of age and marital status. (See Table 9.1) In terms of gender, the same number of female mature students dropped out as males. In Chapter 4 we saw that more males entered as mature students, than women. We also found in Chapter 6 that significantly more women finish their degrees. Although these are different samples, it does suggest that men are more likely to withdraw than women.

Another difference between completed and non-completed mature students relates to children. Those who finish their degree are more likely to not have children, while those who do not finish are more likely to have at least one child. (See Table 7.1)

The typical mature student who drops-out, then, is more likely to be single and have children.

Table 7.1: A social profile of mature students who withdraw	
Characteristics	**Frequency**
(General)	
Has children	14
(Education)	
Has Leaving Certificate	19
Fulfilled matriculation requirements	11
Left in first year	13
(Socio-economic status)	
Comes from middle-class background	14

Base = 24

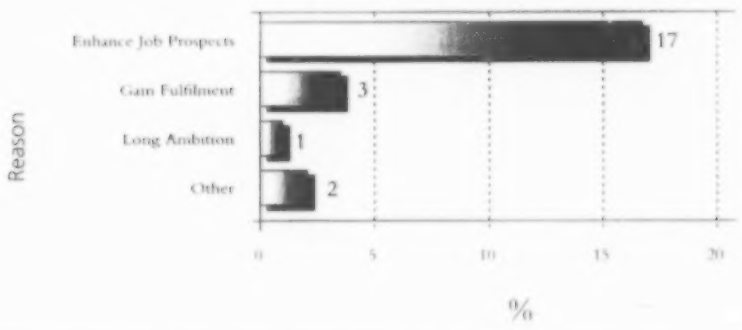
The educational qualifications of those who do not complete resemble those of students who gained degrees. The majority (19 out of 24) gained their Leaving Certificate. Over half of those who sat the Leaving Certificate matriculated. Three-quarters had also taken other education courses since school. Eight participated in third level courses prior to entering UCD. Another three had completed professional nursing qualifications prior to coming to UCD.

One-third of students who completed had parents who went to college. Only one in six of those who withdrew came from families with a tradition of third level education. However, in terms of income, students who withdrew tend to come from the middle classes (14 respondents). The profile of students who withdrew in terms of their own previous occupation is, then, not significantly different from that of students who completed.

Preparing for UCD

Mature students who withdrew from UCD had much the same reasons for going to college as students who completed or are still in the system. For some it was a long ambition. For others, going to college meant gaining knowledge of a particular subject. By far the most popular reason was enhancing employment opportunities. (See Fig. 7.1) Three quarters of the people surveyed mentioned employment as the main reason why they came to college.

Fig. 7.1: Main reason for going to college, students who withdrew



Base = 23, Missing = 1

Pamela is a mature student who withdrew. She is in her mid-thirties and married with 2 children. Her reason for going to college was job-related. Like many others, she saw the attainment of a degree (in her case, Social Science) as a second chance to gain a decent job.

> ***What had happened is, initially in '82 when I first did the Leaving Certificate, I, just like most people was fed up with school and shot off abroad (laughs). And came back after a couple of years and sort of started from scratch. The job market wasn't great, sort of fell in love, got married, had children all very rapidly. And then decided God, all these dead end jobs, better do something about this... didn't seem to be getting anywhere. And it was something that was just niggling away for quite a few years, you know, to continue on.***

Michelle is in her early forties and a lone parent. She wanted to gain a degree to *'better herself.'* She desired the knowledge on offer in UCD, and after having been involved in child development research, was interested in studying Psychology in particular.

From talking to mature students who withdrew, it became apparent that UCD was chosen by some because of its proximity to their home. Michelle lived beside the college, while John, a middle-aged married man, lives in Bray, which is closer to UCD than any other university.

For Rita, a lone parent who lives on the North-side of Dublin, the Modular programme was not an option because of the distance.

> ***I didn't know a lot about that, the Modular... but living over in [name of area in North Dublin], it wasn't really practical, and I had no transport of me own, so it wasn't really practical to go so far at night, you know?***

A third of students who withdrew, took access courses. Nearly all of these did the Leaving Certificate. Rita was one of these. She completed the Leaving Certificate on VTOS. It was while taking this course that Rita first considered college to be an option. Coming from a working-class background, she knew no-one who had previously attended third level. It was on VTOS that she also learnt how to apply to study for a degree in Arts.

> ***I filled in the application form, I was on the VTOS scheme in [local post-secondary school], and I spoke to the VTOS co-ordinator there and she advised me, you know, how to fill in the form and so on. And I wrote a little bit about myself and why I wanted to take the degree. And that was it basically.***

Pamela also took the VTOS Leaving Certificate, followed by a PLC course in Social Science. Looking back she feels this was enough preparation for college.

Like the other groups of mature students in our survey, most of the students who withdrew were not called for interview before they were admitted. They followed the same procedure, and were informed of their acceptance through the post. Michelle, for one, was delighted when UCD offered her a place, and was surprised that it was *'so easy'* to gain entrance. Joe, in his 30s and married, applied to Law. In his case he attended an interview. He believes he gained entry because he had already completed a degree in Science.

Experience of the Course

Figure 7.2 outlines the levels of satisfaction with the college expressed by students who withdrew. These satisfaction levels more or less match those of students who completed degrees. While subjects, entry procedures and teaching methods/quality receive fairly good ratings, aspects related to their own learning (study guidelines, exam feedback, counselling and guidance) were not satisfactory to the majority of students who withdrew.

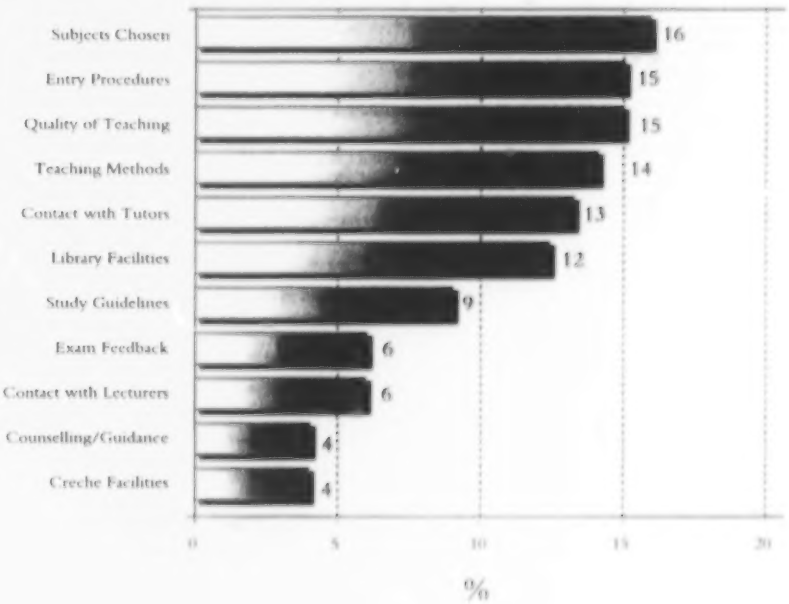
Surprisingly, mature students who withdrew that we talked to, expressed positive memories of UCD. An example is Kevin, who looked favourably on his time in the college.

> ***I thought it [UCD] was very enjoyable. You know, I enjoyed, I spent a fair bit of time in the library, which was fairly good you know... .I thought some of the lecturers were very good now, and eh, and the people there were very nice, the students and the lecturers and that like you know, very nice.***

Rita was another who felt that, overall, her brief stay in UCD was a 'good experience.' At the same time, UCD offered a major culture shock for Rita when she first entered. Universities were not a part of her family tradition.

> ***It was a bit like being thrown in at the deep end. You see, I've no-one sort of in my family or even friends who had been to college so I had no-one to talk to about what it was like. So I suppose it was a bit of a culture shock, you know, to go from, I mean the PLC course I was on, the classes were about 12 to 15 depending on which subject you were going to. And to go from that to sort of a huge lecture theatre of about 400 or 500 people was, it was pretty big. And as I say, there's nobody, I didn't know anybody there, I didn't know anybody who had been to college, to a third level college.***

Fig. 7.2: Satisfaction* with aspects of college, students who withdrew



Base = 24

Michelle had no problems in this regard. Everyone she knew went to college, and UCD in particular. She was familiar with the place from having grown up beside it. As she put it, UCD was not a *'big unknown'* to her. At the same time, she found college life to be 'nervewracking' at the beginning. She found it too busy and *'scary'*. Although she had known people in the past who had gone to UCD, she now knew no-one and felt very isolated. As the course progressed, she began to enjoy the social contact and found the academic side of things very interesting. *'Fantastic'* is how she describes her general experience of college. For Joe, UCD was a great experience. He found the college *'laid back'* and the staff to be excellent. He felt they treated him as an adult and with respect. More negative responses were given when discussing specific aspects of the course such as study load. Rita, who worked part-time and also had to care for her two children on her own, had underestimated the amount of study required for a degree course.

> ***Studying in college takes up a lot more time than I had anticipated. I had done a full-time PLC course sort of from 9 to 4 each day. And then, looking at the timetable for college, you know the way you have so many hours of lectures each day, it seemed like less. So I thought I would be able to balance it all. But given that there was travel time, study time, etc, etc...***

Kevin was another who had problems adjusting to the kind of study involved at university. For him, study and class interaction differed from what he had experienced in adult education.

> ***There weren't any sort of group studies or anything like that, you know. And I think for a lot of mature students who are out of it for so long, they sort of lose contact with how to study properly like you know... .I do see it now, like when I'm after finishing like, there was a lot of things I could have done different like, you know?... more sort of study groups with the talking, get to understand it a bit better, instead of just the reading part of it.***

Both Rita and Kevin had relatively few problems in terms of writing essays. Kevin, however, had difficulties at the beginning.

> ***At first now I didn't [do well at essays] because I didn't know what they wanted at first but then I was getting in on it you know... what information, what way to set it out and all, like you know. When I was going in I wasn't prepared for all that like you know.***

The most negative experience incurred by students who withdrew is exam situations. As we can see in Table 7.2, the majority (9 out of 15) failed at least one subject in first year exams. Michelle failed Psychology in first year, while passing English and Sociology. According to her, if she had known how to study for the Summer exam, she would have passed Psychology. As it turned out, she received the highest repeat mark in the Autumn.

Kevin was not so fortunate. Although he passed Greek and Roman Civilisation, he failed History and Archaeology. He repeated both in the Autumn, and still could not pass. In exam situations, Kevin unfortunately suffers from 'freezing' or 'going blank'.

> ***I know just before we went for the exams you know, did the mock exam, and I'm not joking, just 'cause it was a mock exam, I couldn't get anything down on paper. Now that should have told me. The... tutor even said to me, that happens, but you'll be alright on the day, you know. And it wasn't. The same thing happened in the exam.***

Table 7.2: First year exam results, students who withdrew	
Results	**Number**
All Honours	3
Honours/Passes	2
All Passes	1
Pass/Fail	8
All Fails	1
Total	**15**

Missing = 9 (did not sit exam)

Rita also failed a subject in first year. In her case, it was Economics. She passed English and Sociology. She found Economics to be beyond her, even after three attempts.

> ***I didn't have Maths, when I say I did my Leaving Cert., I just did 2 subjects English and History. Maths, I think you needed to have more of a mathematical mind, a logical way of thinking for Economics which I didn't have. I mean I hadn't studied Maths since I was at school at 16, and I wasn't terribly good at it then. So for me to try, I think I bit off more than I could chew with that subject. English I could cope with quite well, and Sociology yes, you know. But ehm, Economics, it was just beyond me.***

Failing Economics had a very negative impact on Rita, as she felt like a failure, even though she passed two subjects the first time around.

> ***I felt a bit of a failure to be honest. It was more a case of failed rather than looking at it the other way round, and saying, well I passed 2 subjects so maybe I'm not as thick as all that. But I felt a bit of a failure, I felt disappointed.***

For other mature students who withdrew, the most negative aspect of their degree programme was balancing study with work and/or family commitments. Although Michelle failed an exam, she passed on her second attempt. This was not her major source of stress while in college. In second year, she found the course load exceptionally hard. As a lone parent and also working as a self-employed Secretary, she felt that the amount of reading involved in both English and Sociology was very difficult to achieve alongside her other commitments.

Pamela had serious problems balancing such commitments. Her problem was childcare. She had to work to pay for childcare expenses, which meant she suffered a great deal of stress during her time in UCD.

> ***You see I had to work evenings and weekends to pay for childcare. I mean my daily routine started about five in the morning, I had two children, I had one to deliver like three miles one way, and another to be delivered near enough locally to be taken to school. And that was every morning. Then I had to be back directly after lectures whenever they finished in between time, if I had a long break in between them to collect them. I mean, it was just unbelievable, I was running day and night, you know. And then after that come home go to work, come home and fall into bed, back out to college.***

Reasons for Withdrawing

The problems with exams and external commitments are an indicator as to the kind of reasons people left before finishing their degree course. This is verified in Table 7.3, which indicates that the majority of students left because they either failed exams or found it difficult adjusting their other commitments to academic demands. The majority, (13 out of 24) also left college during or just after first year. The first year of the course is the danger time for mature students in UCD, a finding supported by previous research on withdrawal rates.

Table 7.3: Reasons for withdrawing

Reason	Number
Failed Exams	6
Family/Work Commitments	6
Problems with Course	4
Financial Problems	2
Other	4
No Answer/Not Applicable	2
Total	**24**

On the surface, these reasons for withdrawing appear self-explanatory. When we investigated these reasons in personal interviews, other issues began to emerge. Rita, who failed Economics three times in succession, had been advised on her VTOS course to take Economics alongside English and Sociology as a third subject. A lack of background in Mathematics, meant that she received the wrong advice. On top of this obstacle, she did not have the confidence to approach lecturers and ask for advice.

> ***I didn't feel confident to approach any of the lecturers on the course, or the heads of subjects... I don't know, I just didn't have the confidence. It was probably me, you know, a lack of confidence on my part, rather than that they were intimidating, because when I did eventually call up to speak to one of the Economics lecturers, ehm, he was extremely nice, extremely so.***

This lack of confidence in approaching lecturers is understandable, given her working-class background and her lack of knowledge concerning university life in general. This lack of confidence had disastrous consequences for her progression through college. Although she realised early in the course that she could change subjects, Rita did not know how to approach staff and ask to change to a different subject.

> ***I did after you know the first couple of weeks, you know the way you can change subjects during that time, and again, I suppose not knowing anything about college life, eh, I suppose, I didn't like to go and change subjects, do you know what I mean, I didn't have the confidence to just go up and say look excuse me. I knew I could, I'm actually sorry now... . I didn't actually have the confidence to just go up and [ask].***

Kevin is similar to Rita in that he unsuccessfully attempted to pass a subject more than once. In his case, it was not for lack of knowledge, but an inability to deal with exam situations. His motivation was high. He became an external student in Second Year, but did not sit the exam because the syllabus had changed without his knowledge. When comparing his success in essays to his inability to do well in exams, the question of appropriate assessment for mature students arises. Exams are clearly not the type of assessment procedure suitable for this student and resulted in his withdrawal.

Both Pamela and Michelle withdrew from college because of external pressure. So did Joe, whose wife became pregnant at the start of Second Year in UCD. However, he 'came away happy'. He walked out of UCD and back into his full-time job as a pharmacist. He had already gained a degree in Science and felt no distress at leaving. According to him, there was no stigma attached to withdrawing in his case.

For both Pamela and Michelle, leaving was more stressful. Attempting to combine motherhood, work and study, turned out to be too much. As Michelle put it, she was a full-time student, a full-time mother, and full-time secretary. *'Something had to go'*. According to her, she would still be in college if she had been able to survive financially and look after her children on the £1,600 a year grant and Social Welfare.

Pamela had to work to pay for childcare. A major part of the problem she faced was the lack of available child-care facilities in the area surrounding UCD. All were fully booked. The pressure proved too great.

> ***All weekend I worked nights and I mean after a year, I just... couldn't keep it up anymore. And it was a case of necessity, I had to work to pay for the childcare, and the travel, if I didn't do that I couldn't afford to go, and I couldn't go.***

Pamela believes that she would have stayed only for an illness in her family, which she had to take care of. This turned out to be the catalyst for her withdrawing. Her situation is an indication of the continuum that mature students inhabit between completion and non-completion. She left before she could sit her first year exams.

> ***Two months before the exams eh, my paternal grandmother took very ill, and I was looking after her in between. It had actually happened very suddenly, I sat one day in the cafeteria chatting to some of my fellow students, and I just said that's it, I just can't hack it right now. It was a very sudden decision... . That was the final straw, put it that way, that was the final catalyst, do you know what I mean? It had been working, lack of time for study, rushing around. And then, not enough library time, not enough time to be looking up things. And then the final straw would have to be taking that on board as well, it was the final straw.***

According to Pamela, despite pressure of work and children, she would have still sat her first-year exams were it not for this family illness.

Although Pamela and the others have withdrawn from college, this has not affected their appetite for higher education. Rita says she would love another opportunity to gain a degree: *'having thought about it and having talked about it with people, yeah, I'd like to have another bash at it.'* Pamela would also love to try again, being aware this time of the possible pitfalls involved in undertaking a degree programme.

> ***Definitely, it's ehm, something that's still there, very strongly, I definitely intend to finish or complete or do the degree at some stage of my life. Now I was thinking about it last year, I was thinking about doing it through the Open University or something. Because I have no accreditation or anything I never did the first year exams so it's from scratch again. So I was thinking, God, would I start back now and I said no, it's not the right time. Because my children are still attending school and I'm afraid I still have to work, and I'm afraid a year into it or three years into it I'd make the same boo-boo... . I will wait till I definitely have time to do so.***

Looking back on their experience in UCD, some suggestions were made concerning the college and what can be done to increase retention rates. Not surprisingly, Pamela suggests that better child-care facilities should be on offer. Michelle feels that the allocation of a larger grant would have helped her situation. In fact, Michelle, Pamela and Rita were all affected by lack of adequate financial support during their time in UCD. This is an indication of how access to college favours the more privileged sectors of society and those who can afford to study for a full-time degree.

Rita felt very strongly that the college should provide support in the shape of counselling facilities for mature students. This would clearly have benefited her own situation and helped her gain the confidence needed to feel a part of the institution.

> ***I think there could be better counselling facilities, I mean, there could be more advertising of the counselling facilities for a start off. I don't know, perhaps, students could be encouraged to feel that they're not going to be a bother if they go ask for advice or if they ask to change. Because for people like myself, I found college very intimidating especially in that first term, that I didn't actually like to go and bother anybody. So it would be nice for people, particularly those like myself, if it could be made very clear, look you're not going to be a bother, you're not going to be a nuisance, we want you to come and get help before you start finding yourself out of your depth.***

Conclusion

In this chapter we explored the experience of mature students who left before they finished their course. Students who withdrew exhibit the same general profile as students who completed. Those we interviewed expressed positive memories of UCD. Many who withdrew did so because they failed exams, and/or due to the pressure of external commitments such as work and family.

The findings of this chapter provide an opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of students who completed and those who did not. Those who complete tend to be viewed as successful, while those who withdraw tend to be seen as failures. This difference is usually attributed to differences in individual intelligence and ability to cope with the general academic demands of university life. The most significant finding in this chapter is that these groups of students are quite similar in many important characteristics. They have the same educational qualifications and come from similar backgrounds. In our survey, they indicated the same levels of satisfaction with the college. What this finding suggests is that the difference between success and failure has as much to do with the institution itself as it does with individual students. Of course, students experience their own set of problems during their time at college, but our findings indicate that mature students exist between failure on one side, and success on the other. There is a thin line between the two, to which the high withdrawal rate in UCD testifies. The inadequate level of support for mature students and the lack of acknowledgement of the problems they face is, then, clearly a large factor in the decision of mature students to withdraw.

Chapter 8 .

Critical Reflections from Some of the Deans

There is little overall formal college policy on mature students in UCD. It is left to each individual Faculty to decide on the number that it accepts each year, the manner in which applications are assessed, and the facilities and resources allocated to mature students. As part of our research, we talked to the Deans of the Faculties of Arts, Science, and Philosophy and Sociology. These Faculties attract the largest number of applications and accept the largest number of students. We wanted to find out through personal interviews something more about the way mature students are viewed and understood at senior management level. We also wanted to understand the process by which applications are assessed, and about how the Deans thought the College might be able to cater more successfully for the needs and interests of adult learners. It should be noted that while Philosophy and Sociology are Arts subjects, the Dean of Philosophy and Sociology only acts in relation to admission to the degree in Social Science. We report the interviews in the order in which they took place.

Dean of Science

Professor Gerry Doyle, Dean of the Faculty of Science, felt that the 8 places set aside for mature students, was probably about the right number. The problem was that most of the mature students they took in had some form of educational difficulty and therefore were less likely to last the course as school leavers. He was critical of some access courses. Some applicants felt that completing an access course was a very strong additional bow to their string. In this respect, he felt the organisers of the access courses may be deluding students. But what they need most was a demonstrated ability in Science and Mathematics. Basically, applicants need to have reached Leaving Certificate standard in Mathematics and a science subject. Experience does not substitute for qualifications. But applicants also need to be highly motivated. He is against the College setting up and running its own pre-university course. This was neither his job, nor that of the College.

He felt, then, that there was a need for mature students to receive information, advice and guidance before applying. Applicants are given a page on the CAO form to indicate how they will survive in a science degree programme, and yet many do not provide any explanation. The result was that in 1998 the vast bulk of applications were for Computer Science and yet none got through. Some applicants seemed to think that doing a computer science module within an access course was sufficient to meet the entry requirements. The continued absence of some information or advice before students submitted applications wasted their time and his. There was a need for some feedback on why applicants were not successful. At present, he said, there were people applying who he could not see ever being accepted.

Dean Doyle does the selection process himself. He thinks it is important to interview applicants. This is crucial to determine who has the necessary motivation, time and resources to be a success. The previous year he called 14 people for interview, but half did not reply to the invitation. This year he invited 10, but excluded those who already had a master's degree since, he felt, they already had their opportunity.

Once accepted, mature students are 'chased up and kept a close eye on' in Science. Dean Doyle feels that most can manage academically. The problem they face is making their degree commitments fit in with other commitments. Since a science degree requires students to be on campus from 9 to 5, five days a week, he believes that it is probably more appropriate for mature students to study for an Arts degree. Nevertheless, mature students do make a positive contribution to the College. He sees them having a 'calming influence' on the younger students. He used to keep in regular contact with them during the year, but has had to cease this since he became Dean. However, he says, he received some good criticisms and feedback from mature students. But he does not think the existing policy or numbers accepted should be changed. 'I'm of the belief that priority should be given to school leavers. I'm very conscious of the hundreds we reject who get degrees elsewhere.'

Dean Doyle was not in favour of outreach programmes. Again the main reason was resources. He points out that they now have 50 per cent more students than they did formerly with the same number of staff. An outreach programme would just mean more students coming into second year. There are only 260 places, so the danger of an outreach programme would be that it would end up like the old pre-Medical course in which only a third of the participants continue.

He did not see much need to start preparing for the type of situation which exists in Great Britain where almost a half of third level enrolments are mature students. There are, he points out, 7,000 students who apply for places in UCD. Even if this number halved, it would still not affect the numbers in the College. So he is in favour of maintaining the present number of mature students, and of taking in 'the bright and talented from disadvantaged backgrounds.'

He would like to see some overall College policy regarding mature students. At present, each Faculty acts like a different religion. 'It would be reasonable if there was a policy which overarched all the Faculties.' In particular, he would like to see an end to the applications being made through the CAO and the documentation for applications being designed more carefully. He said it is very difficult to interpret the CAO form and students' intentions, especially when applicants rank other courses ahead of UCD. He thinks this is linked to people not coming to interviews when invited, which is a waste of time.

Dean of Arts

The Faculty of Arts has undoubtedly the longest and best tradition of responding to the learning needs of mature students in UCD. The Faculty had always provided a comprehensive evening degree programme. At one point in the early 1980s the Faculty of Arts was able to admit up to 100 well-qualified mature students into the full-time, day degree programme. However, as Dean D'Arcy pointed out, with the decline in the labour market and the rising demand for university places, the arrival of the CAO points system and the number of mature students lacking matriculation, the Faculty came under pressure to meet the needs of school leavers. It was, as Dean D'Arcy said, partly in response to this changing environment that the Faculty had embarked on a new Modular evening degree programme. The main advantages of the BA Modular was that it had 'a regular annual intake, a structure designed for mature students, and a large number of places available to

non-matriculated students'. As for the number of day-time places offered to mature students, with the exception of the beginning of the 1980s, this has always been at the level of around 30 places.

With regard to assessment of mature applications, the Dean said that there used to be a committee to interview candidates. However, after some years experience this had been found to be counterproductive; it only prolonged the process and increased the sense of disappointment of those who were interviewed but who were not finally successful. The current evaluation process is conducted by the Dean and his advisors, as soon as possible after the applications are received from the CAO, via the Admissions Office. With over 600 applications annually, the evaluation process can take up to a month.

The level of take up of offers made varies. It has been as high as 25 and as low as 11. As well as offers being made to non-matriculated mature students, there are also offers to matriculated students without points, and the Faculty also offers annually a significant number of places to applicants with disabilities.

Assessment is based 'on the quality of the written application and the presentation of concrete evidence of sustained educational endeavour and interest'. This meant that there was a preference for older applicants, since they were more likely to have firmer evidence of educational endeavour than applicants in their mid-twenties who would, for the most part, have only recently completed a Leaving Certificate course. There is a danger that, if too many applicants in their mid-twenties are accepted who have neither the necessary points nor matriculation subjects, this could be seen as a form of entry through the 'back door'. Consequently, applicants over 30 years without the necessary matriculation subjects tended to have a much better chance than younger applicants with no matriculation subjects and no points.

He would like to see a system which had better resources and which ideally would have a clearly defined system of entry with more clearly defined access criteria. However, Dean D'Arcy was not sure if the time had come for a quota system, within which those who had done well in a recognised access course would be guaranteed a place. If there were sufficient resources and staffing, he would be happy to see the annual intake increased significantly. But the problem, he said, was that this would mean reducing the number of qualified school-leaving students. While he agreed that mature students had contributed to society through taxes and work, he was not in favour of taking places away from school-leavers.

Dean D'Arcy felt that the Modular BA programme was much better suited to the needs and interests of mature students, particularly in terms of being able to study at their own pace. Therefore, Dean D'Arcy was in favour of directing mature students towards the BA Modular programme. He realised, however, that the cost of the evening degree was a problem. 'The Faculty of Arts would wish to see the Modular degree programme as fully resourced by the HEA as the day degree programme, thereby facilitating a major additional contribution to providing more places for the student seeking admission on the grounds of mature years'.

When asked about the possibility of making the day degree modularised and running it continuously throughout the day and evening — with more popular first year subjects being offered in outreach centres — the Dean said that while it may seem attractive there would be enormous implications. There would be a dramatic increase in numbers attending lectures and tutorials, which would create pressure on limited space and much more work for staff. He felt that the level of resources required would make the government balk.

Dean D'Arcy recognised that mature students made an important contribution to student life in the College. He did not have a strong feeling in favour of appointing a mature student officer. He felt that in general, mature students would want to integrate and not to stand out as some kind of exception.

Finally, when asked if College policy regarding mature students was best left to individual faculties, Dean D'Arcy had an open mind, but since Faculties had responsibility for managing resources they must have a major say. He was proud of the contribution the Faculty of Arts had made to accommodating non-traditional entry students. The Faculty had done more than its fair share in shouldering responsibility on this issue. The establishment of the Modular BA programme was testimony of this. However, he felt it essential that College and Government work together 'to plan a strategy, which would enable more mature applicants to take up the BA Modular evening degree programme'.

Dean of Philosophy and Sociology

Professor Patrick Clancy had only just taken up his position of Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology when we interviewed him. There was an agreed policy in the Faculty to admit 10 per cent of the annual intake of 150 students. This, as Dean Clancy pointed out, 'is relatively generous by College standards' and reflects 'a clearer realisation of higher education opportunities for older students' in the Faculty. The Faculty's policy reflected a recognition that generational inequality had expanded recently. About half of the present generation can get into higher education. In the 1960s it was about 10 per cent. Moreover, it was also accepted that the best time to study Social Science is when you are older. Students had more experience of the social world.

The policy regarding mature students had evolved over the last 15 years. There used to be an open admissions policy. However, once places were restricted, there was advice that in order to avoid litigation, the Faculty could not allow unqualified students into restricted courses. The resolution was to go half way. Students who had not matriculated would not be admitted. This was later considered too restrictive. Only recently did the Faculty admit mature students without the necessary points or matriculation subjects.

We asked Dean Clancy if he considered it disingenuous to include those who had gained the necessary CAO points for a course when calculating the number of mature students admitted to College. He disagreed. He pointed out that national policy focused on increasing the number of students over 23 years old. It was not just an issue of redressing generational inequality, it was realised that it was a good thing for the student body. There was a need to create awareness in departments, Faculties and colleges about having a mix in age. At present, he said, the student support system effectively discriminates against mature students.

When we asked if school leavers had more right to a place in third level education, Dean Clancy was unsure. He accepted it was a difficult question. It was not just an issue of national policy, but a cultural issue. In the final analysis, he felt it came down to costs and benefits. What was the cost of not giving a place? This was where he felt school leavers won out. But, he said, other countries have a more relaxed policy, and accept that education is not a once off opportunity.

There was also the possibility of following the Swedish example where credits are given for experience. However, educational institutions have to work within social and cultural restraints.

There would be uproar if we said that we were going to keep 10,000 places out of 30,000 for mature students, thereby denying school leavers for which there are not other major options such as a vibrant labour market. It would effectively push school leavers into post-Leaving Certificate courses.

Applications for the Social Science degree are assessed by a committee. There is a reserve list in case first chosen candidates do not take up their offers. Dean Clancy estimates that at least half of the candidates would be suitable. He thinks that existing application procedures could be improved and that, within legal constraints, there should be some feedback given to applicants. This would require an investment of resources.

Up until now, Dean Clancy says, the College has got away with a low level of expenditure. However, as demographic changes begin to take hold, there will have to be major changes in the recruitment and treatment of mature students. This, he believes, needs to happen within the College and in terms of national policy. He thinks that within UCD there is a need to appoint a mature student officer, and that within each department there should be someone appointed to take responsibility for mature student policy, planning and administration. The first major issue that needs to be addressed is the enormous variation in the policies and practices of the different Faculties. But College policy needs to be synchronised with national policy.

At national level, there are two major issues. First, the need to develop proper, preparatory access programmes which have currency across the country within all third level colleges. 'It is' he says 'a nonsense to send adults back to do the Leaving Certificate.' Secondly, there is a need to develop a national infrastructure that would give mature students access to educational advice, guidance and counselling services.

Dean Clancy thought that there was a long-term logic in moving towards the semesterisation and modularisation of all courses. He saw this as a 'structured adaptation to mass higher education'. It was a more difficult system to administer and so, although logical and desirable, 'we will be going there screaming'. Similarly, he was in favour of developing outreach programmes. These had enormous potential for meeting the needs of mature students. We would, he said, effectively be getting into the area of franchising. He also thought that the Internet would eventually challenge the structure of degree programmes. There would be less rigid course programmes. There would be greater flexibility with students able to design their own learning programmes around core subjects.

Chapter 9

Summary of Findings

As part of our study of mature students in UCD, we conducted a survey based on five different samples: Those who applied but did not gain entry to UCD; mature students registered for full-time undergraduate degree programmes; students studying part-time for the BA Modular degree; mature graduates who had completed their degrees; and mature students who had withdrawn from their degree programmes. We analysed these samples in terms of some standard socio-demographic variables. (See Table 9.1)

Overall, our analysis suggests that a typical portrait of a mature student would see them as male or female, over thirty years old, single, with no children. They would have sat the Leaving Certificate and obtained two or more honours. They would come from more professional, middle class backgrounds, although their parents are unlikely to have completed second level education. In other words, they tend to have upwardly mobile social backgrounds. A mature student is likely to have taken some educational courses since leaving school, some at third level, but most at the level of further education where they gained vocationally-oriented qualifications.

Looking at the socio-demographic analysis in more detail, we can see that in relation to gender, we found that students who completed degrees had a different profile compared to the other groups. Nearly three-quarters were female, compared to four in ten of current students. Although these findings are generated from different samples, it suggests that women are more likely to complete their degrees than men. It is a finding supported by previous research.

Unsuccessful applicants are younger than students in the other samples. This is particularly true when we compare them to Modular BA students. Those who take the part-time evening degree course are older than current full-time mature students. Students on the Modular degree programme are also more likely to be married with children, as compared to those in the other groupings. These findings suggest that the full-time and part-time degree programmes in UCD cater for different kinds of mature students.

When it came to looking at the influence of educational attainment, we found that the majority of our respondents had obtained their Leaving Certificate (75 per cent). Of those who did the Leaving Certificate, over half (58 per cent) matriculated. One in six of our respondents had failed. Nearly half (48 per cent) of those who did not gain entry to UCD had matriculated. In other words, they had passed the second level subjects necessary to study for specific degrees. Students on the Modular BA programme had the poorest Leaving Certificate results. Over a third (35 per cent) had failed. These findings suggest that the Modular programme has become the main access route into second-chance higher education for educationally disadvantaged adults.

Table 9.1: General profile of survey respondents

CHARACTERISTIC	DESCRIPTION	UNSUCCESSFUL		FULL-TIME		PART-TIME		COMPLETED		WITHDRAWALS		TOTAL	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
SEX	Male	41	55	36	58	26	42	15	28	12	50	130	47
	Female	33	45	26	42	36	58	39	72	12	50	146	53
AGE	Under 30	41	56	27	44	7	11	12	22	6	26	93	34
	Between 30 & 44	21	29	23	37	25	40	24	45	9	37	102	37
	45 and over	11	15	12	19	30	49	18	33	3	37	80	09
	No Answer/not Applicable	1	Mis.	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	01	Mis.
MARITAL STATUS	Single	52	70	39	63	25	40	27	50	12	50	155	56
	Married	15	20	18	29	33	53	20	37	9	37	95	34
	Separated	4	6	2	3	3	5	5	9	3	3	17	6
	Widowed	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1	3
	Religous/Celibate	3	4	1	2	—	—	1	2	—	—	15	2
	Other	—	—	2	3	—	—	1	2	—	—	3	1.7
NO. OF CHILDREN	None	50	68	42	69	26	42	31	59	10	42	159	58
	One	8	11	2	3	4	6	4	8	4	17	22	8
	Two	4	5	8	13	13	21	5	9	6	25	36	13
	Three	4	5	2	3	11	18	7	13	1	4	25	9
	Four or More	8	11	7	12	8	13	6	11	3	12	32	12
	No Answer/Not Applicable	—	—	1	Mis.	—	—	1	Mis.	—	—	2	Mis.
FINAL SCHOOL EXAM	Leaving Certificate	52	71	50	82	41	67	46	86	19	79	208	75
	Inter/Group/Primary	13	18	8	13	13	21	4	7	2	8	40	15
	Other	8	11	3	5	7	12	4	7	3	13	25	10
	No Answer/Not Applicable	1	Mis.	1	Mis.	1	Mis.	—	—	—	—	3	Mis.
LEAVING CERT. RESULTS	Pass/fail	9	17	5	10	14	35	5	13	2	11	35	17
	All passes	10	19	4	8	5	13	3	8	4	21	26	13
	1 honour/passes	8	16	7	14	4	10	2	5	2	11	23	12
	2 honours	6	12	6	12	5	12	7	18	1	4	25	13
	3 honours	11	22	4	8	6	15	4	10	2	11	27	14
	4 or more honours	7	14	23	47	6	15	18	46	8	42	62	31
	No answer/not applicable	23	Mis.	13	Mis.	22	Mis.	15	Mis.	5	Mis.	78	Mis.
EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS	Degree/part of degree	4	8	8	17	7	15	6	15	5	25	30	15
	Other higher education	3	6	8	17	5	11	10	25	3	15	29	14
	Further education	31	61	17	36	25	56	10	25	9	45	92	45
	Extra-mural	5	10	3	6	3	7	5	12	—	—	16	8
	Nursing	2	4	5	11	4	9	7	18	3	15	21	10
	Other	6	11	6	13	1	2	2	5	—	—	15	8
	No answer/not applicable	23	Mis.	15	Mis.	17	Mis.	14	Mis.	04	Mis.	73	Mis.

1 Does not include access courses

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Table 9.1: General profile of survey respondents — *continued*

CHARACTERISTIC	DESCRIPTION	UNSUCCESSFUL		FULL-TIME		PART-TIME		COMPLETED		WITHDRAWALS		TOTAL	
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
PREVIOUS MAIN OCCUPATION	Various	48	65	21	34	21	34	25	47	8	33	123	45
	Steady job	13	18	22	36	25	41	19	36	8	33	87	32
	Homemaker	3	4	4	7	9	15	2	4	4	17	22	8
	Nursing	4	5	10	16	4	7	5	9	3	13	26	10
	Other	6	8	4	7	2	3	2	4	1	4	15	5
	No answer/not applicable	—	—	01	Mis.	1	Mis.	1	Mis.	—	—	3	Mis.
PARENT'S EDUCATION	Primary	27	38	23	39	28	46	18	35	9	43	105	40
	Incomplete Secondary	21	30	15	25	9	15	3	6	—	—	48	18
	Leaving Cert.	10	14	8	14	14	23	14	28	9	43	55	21
	Third level	10	14	13	22	10	16	16	31	3	14	52	20
	Other	3	4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	3	1
	No answer/not applicable	3	Mis.	3	Mis.	1	Mis.	3	Mis.	3	Mis.	13	Mis.
PARENT'S OCCUPATION	Lower manual	16	23	14	24	9	14	5	9	—	—	44	16
	Higher manual	18	25	14	24	17	27	13	24	9	39	71	27
	Intermediate non-manual	3	4	—	—	4	7	2	4	—	—	9	3
	Lower professional	25	35	20	34	21	34	21	40	9	39	96	36
	Higher professional	8	11	11	19	11	18	12	23	5	22	47	17.5
	Other	1	2	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	5
	No answer/not applicable	3	Mis.	3	Mis.	—	—	1	Mis.	1	Mis.	8	Mis.
Financial Support	Employment	Not Applicable		14	23	16	30	36	58	8	33	74	37
	Scholarship			2	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
	Family Support			15	24	16	30	18	30	3	13	52	26
	Third Level Allowance			15	24	7	13	0	0	7	29	29	14
	Grant			5	8	5	9	0	0	2	8	12	6
	Lone Parents Allowance			1	2	1	2	0	0	0	0	2	1
	Pension			5	8	5	9	4	6	1	4	15	7
	Other			5	8	4	7	4	6	3	13	16	8
	No Answer/not Applicable			0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Access Course Taken[3]	None	41	55	44	71	42	78	41	66	16	67	184	65
	Leaving Cert	24	32	11	18	8	15	3	5	7	29	53	19
	University Foundation	7	9	5	8	4	7	1	2	0	0	17	6
	Return to Learning/Study	4	5	4	7	3	6	17	27	1	4	29	10
	Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	No Answer/Not Applicable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL		74	100%	62	100%	62	100%	54	100%	24	100	276	100

2 This does not apply to unsuccessful applicants. Total = 202.

3 Some people took more than one access. The figures do not necessarily correspond to totals.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Three quarters of our respondents had taken an adult, continuing or further education course since they left school; 45 per cent of these had obtained some certificate or award. Another three in ten had some previous experience of higher education. One in ten had Nursing qualifications. In other words, the majority (84 per cent) of our respondents had taken some form of accredited educational course since leaving school. Adult and further education courses act as an informal gateway in the struggle by mature learners to gain entry to university.

Unsuccessful applicants differ somewhat from this overall finding. They are at a disadvantage in terms of the type of qualification they received prior to applying to UCD. Only 14 per cent of unsuccessful applicants, compared to 29 per cent overall, had previous experience of higher education. They also are more likely to have taken further education courses: 61 per cent, compared to 45 per cent of the overall sample. This finding suggests that those who have previous experience of third level education are more likely to gain places on degree programmes than those who had no experience of higher education. For many mature students, then, gaining a place is their second chance at completing a degree, while others are denied a first opportunity.

The absence of second chance educational opportunities for more disadvantaged adult learners is evident when we look at the backgrounds of the mature students. The majority of our respondents (53 per cent) came from professional backgrounds. In other words, while they themselves do not have the educational qualifications necessary to gain direct entry, it does appear as if they benefit from the consistent application of specific criteria.

When we look at our respondents' occupational status, we see that four in ten do not have a specific occupation and are likely to have held various jobs ranging in occupational status. Less than one third had a steady occupation or employment. This would suggest that while many mature students may have come from upwardly social mobile families, they themselves are downwardly mobile, and see a degree as a means of self-transformation. In this regard, many have the necessary criteria to be admitted except, of course, single males under 30 years old who tended to be unsuccessful in their applications.

Experience of access and preparation for college

There were many reasons given by our respondents for wanting to go to university and, specifically, to come to UCD. Some wished to improve their chances of gaining a better job. Others had more personal reasons; they wanted to develop their knowledge and a sense of fulfilment through taking a degree course. Many regretted not having been able to go to college when they left school.

The advent of free fees, the introduction of the Third Level Allowance Scheme and, for some, changes in personal circumstances, had provided them with the opportunity to undertake a degree course. Most of our respondents did not consider the Modular course to be an option. There were various reasons for this that revolved around it being part-time at night, the cost of fees, and family and work commitments. There was also the suggestion that it was not the full, real experience of university. But whatever the reason, the reality is that four and a half times as many people apply to do a full-time day degree as apply to the Modular BA, even though their chances of being accepted are one in seventeen, compared to over four in five for the Modular BA.

Apart from students who entered the Modular BA, the experience of applying to UCD was one of frustration and lack of information. Most of our respondents had put a considerable

effort into their application. Many had taken specifically designed university access courses, one of which is run by UCD. They hoped that doing an access course would be to their advantage. Often it was not. There was general confusion and ignorance about what applicants needed to do in order to gain entry. Those who were unsuccessful could not understand why their applications had been rejected. On the other hand, those whose applications had been successful were equally mystified why they had been accepted while others had not.

The students on the Modular programme expressed no such misgivings. For them, the degree is more like a service that they need to pay for in order to take advantage of higher education. They generally had little difficulty in gaining entry to UCD.

Experience of UCD

Mature students in UCD share many similar experiences. For most, coming to UCD was a dream come true - the culmination of a long hard struggle to get into university, and to become immersed in academic life. It was high up on the list of the best things they had ever done. Their enthusiasm for UCD and academic life, particularly in the focus group interviews, was almost evangelical. They would highly recommend it to everyone. They enjoyed the courses they had taken, the lectures and tutorials. They liked academic life and being a student. They liked being in UCD and meeting other students.

But there were negative aspects. Many of our respondents were not happy with the amount of contact they had with lecturers. They were dissatisfied with the level of guidance and advice they received. They found it difficult to decipher what amount and kind of work they had to do in relation to each course. A particular grievance was essay writing. It was a major requirement for which many respondents were not prepared. There were also complaints about not being taught study skills, and the level of feedback they obtained from essays and exams. They felt that there was a lack of awareness of the special needs of mature students, that the College did not recognise or respond to their needs and interests as adult learners. Many mature students felt marginalised and isolated. The day students saw themselves as a minority group who stood out from younger school leavers. The part-time evening students liked the sense of companionship, but believed they were missing out on a full university experience. They liked the flexibility of the programme, but still had difficulty balancing academic demands with work and family commitments. The most significant reasons for students withdrawing from college were failing an exam and not being able to meet family and work commitments. Most agreed that first year was particularly difficult. Students had to learn to adapt on their own. Everyone was thrown in at the deep end. If they did not learn to swim quickly, they sank.

There is, then, a huge demand by mature students for places in UCD. People try again and again to be accepted. They are not at all sure what is needed to be accepted. They take a variety of courses to improve their chances, and are bitterly disappointed when their applications are unsuccessful. For many it is not only a feeling of rejection, it was the way they were rejected. They received no letter from the college. They were given no feedback as to why they had been unsuccessful. They were given no guidance about what they would have to do to be successful the following year. They were confused about the criteria used to assess applications. Many felt that they were unsuccessful because they did not know anyone in the college, or did not introduce themselves personally. Others felt that they were being pushed towards the Modular BA degree.

Nearly half of the unsuccessful applicants we surveyed had obtained places on degree programmes in other third level institutions. Many felt that UCD should take in more full-time mature students. They also believed that there should be changes in policy regarding both the level of admissions and admission procedures. They called for a definite set of assessment criteria to be established. They believed interviews would be a fairer system for choosing mature applicants. In terms of degree structure, they believed that if access to on-campus full-time degrees is unavailable, the college could consider a combination of on-campus and off-campus courses in an outreach centre. Another suggestion was the development of an approved foundation course, as a possible first year of a four-year degree. Others felt that the College should create a formal system by which credit is given to prior learning.

Chapter 10

Mature Student Policy and Practice

UCD has one of the lowest admission rates of full-time mature students in the Irish university sector. The College would appear to prefer that adult learners study part-time through the Modular BA degree. But mature students prefer to study during the day. There is a huge demand for places, but the College is unable to meet this demand. The number of full-time mature students accepted each year has decreased since the 1980s. This is essentially a consequence of increased demand from school leavers for places. At the same time, it is a manifestation of a policy that prefers standard entry applicants to non-standard applicants.

Another issue is the low numbers accepted onto degree programmes such as Science, Engineering, Commerce, and Law. A similar situation occurs in Britain. Goodlad (1990:159) discussed the problems in England of mature student access to Mathematics and Science disciplines. He noted the difficulty of women and mature students gaining access to university courses in Mathematics, Science and Technology. Lynch (1997) and Clancy (1995) discovered similar findings for Irish third level colleges. It would be wrong to view this imbalance simply as a consequence of demand. As Woodley (1991:92) put it:

> ***The distribution between subjects reflects admissions procedure policies as well as student demand. The evidence suggests that part of the reason for the relatively small number in the fields of Science and Medicine is that it is more difficult for mature applicants to gain a place.***

Successful applicants were as confused as to the reasons why they got in, as unsuccessful applicants were about the reasons why they were rejected. There is, apart from the CAO form, no standardised procedure by which mature applicants are assessed. Respondents expressed misgivings about the reliance on the CAO form as the sole method of assessment in Arts and Social Science. The lack of an interview was crucial here. Mature applicants were not sure if their previous qualifications were good enough, if their educational background was suitable, or if these were taken into account at all.

There are two questions raised in relation to admissions procedure in UCD. The first is the reliance on Leaving Certificate points as the standard entry for both school leavers and mature students. In effect this forces mature students, many of whom left school up to twenty years ago, to return to school and re-sit the Leaving Certificate examination. The problem is that for many adult learners going back to school is a demeaning and demoralising experience. The absence of formal admission criteria for entry on the grounds of mature years means that the methods by which candidates are assessed are invisible. The existence of an open and transparent system of assessment is essential in all forms of education, including admission procedures.

UCD does not have the type of admissions assessment criteria that are standard, for example, in British universities. Although credit is given for prior learning, there is no formal structure in place; there is no transparent system by which applicants know that by accumulating a portfolio of certain educational courses, combined with relevant life and work experiences, they will be accepted. Similarly, there is no formally organised link between UCD and colleges providing adult, further and higher education courses. No matter how well an applicant performs on one of these courses, there is no guarantee of being accepted.

Mature student access policy in UCD is designed by each individual Faculty. UCD is no different to universities in Britain in this regard. As McGivney points out, traditional department structures in Britain constitute one of the fundamental barriers to admissions because of the vested interests involved.

> In most places policy is still in an important sense the sum of the policies of separate departments... Success in implementing institutional policy usually depended on how successfully it could be reconciled with department's current policy and practice (1990:165).

So when we examine issues such as acceptance rates and admissions procedures, what we find in UCD is an access policy which is at least partially one of neglect by lack of vision. Admission rates are kept low because of the primacy given to school leaver demand. Faculties do not see the need to increase the level of admissions or for any kind of formal assessment procedure to be established. There seems to be a fear that, if the hidden quotas and assessment procedures become visible, this will have the effect of validating alternative routes of entry into the College. This would result in creating a dual system of entry, which is clearly what the College as a whole does not want to occur. The policy, then, would seem to be to have no policy, since to introduce a policy could be seen to tipping the balance more in favour of mature students than traditional school leavers. This, we feel, raises fundamental questions about equality which the College authorities and individual Faculties need to address.

In this report we have emphasised that when it comes to mature students it is important to distinguish issues of access from issues of accessibility. Getting into college is distinct from how welcoming, accommodating and helpful the college is to mature students once they enter. Accessibility relates to issues of curriculum design, teaching methods, assessment, and student support. It relates to the way knowledge is presented, to the respect and care given to students, and to the extent to which they have a say in what, when and how they learn. Adult learners resent being treated as empty vessels into which those who know, pour knowledge. Adult learners like to be treated as equals. It is not so much that they do not know anything about the world in which they live, but rather that they know the world differently. Unless teachers enter into a partnership with learners where there is mutual respect for each other, education can come to be seen by learners as an exercise of power, rather than an acquisition of knowledge. It is our argument that lecturers and tutors in UCD and other third level institutions could learn a good deal from the teaching methods that have been developed in the field of adult education. This relates less to the passing on of knowledge and information in lectures, and more to the teaching methods used in small groups. Our respondents found tutorials frustrating and unsatisfying. Instead of being able to discuss their new knowledge and apply it to their experiences, they tended to find themselves in the role of key respondent to the tutor. They did not appreciate being singled out in tutorials and having to carry the discussion. In a very real sense, mature students felt used in these situations, resulting in a dampening of their natural enthusiasm to engage in debate. But this raises issues of the nature of small group learning in university. It is not possible here to debate the reasons why traditional students are far more reluctant,

unwilling or simply unable to engage in academic discussion. Much of this has to do with fear and a lack of self-confidence — often brought on through strategies of intimidation. There is much that tutors and lecturers could learn from adult education methods where there is an emphasis on learners finding their own voice and expressing themselves, and developing a sense of control over their learning.

Many of our respondents pointed to the difficulty they had relating to and interacting with lecturers, tutors and other members of staff. They felt that they were not equipped to deal with their learning needs. Lecturers and tutors are not required to take teacher-training courses, so it is perhaps not surprising to find that many mature students have difficulties interacting with them. It may be mature students were able to voice their criticisms and lack of satisfaction which is something traditional students may have been unable to do. College teaching policy would seem to be a reflection of its own traditional, hierarchical structure. All power rests with the lecturer and the tutor. It is up to individual students to cope with and adjust to the teaching methods and curriculum on offer in the college, and less about the college attempting to discover, recognise and meet the needs and interests of the students.

Our respondents expressed dissatisfaction with assessment procedures used in UCD. Mature students work very hard while in college, and spend a great deal of time attempting to meet the demands of the college. They are good students. They would, however, prefer assessment on a more continual basis, rather than being primarily oriented to exams. This is clearly an issue in relation to the very high withdrawal rate in the college. The majority of those who left had failed an exam in first year despite having been regular attenders at lectures and tutorials, and doing the required amount of study. This very high withdrawal rate might decrease if assessment were geared towards the whole year's work, rather than one exam sitting.

An aspect of UCD that made it most inaccessible for mature students, was the lack of guidance they received while studying for their degrees. Across the board, aspects of college life such as study guidelines, ongoing consultation, and feedback from essays and exams, received poor ratings from our respondents. All students, both mature and traditional, have to learn the 'tricks of the (academic) trade' such as knowing what to study, how much to read, how to write essays, and how to decipher what lecturers and tutors are looking for in essays and exams. This is what Fleming and Murphy (1997) have described as the hidden agenda of 'college knowledge'. The demands of the college appear foreign to them, and they have great difficulty adjusting their needs to those of the institution. The issue that UCD has to address is that the high level of withdrawal by mature students, may not be so much a case of 'natural wastage' as a lack of proper and efficient guidance, counselling and teaching. Learning difficulties and adaptation to academic life are seen as individual rather than institutional problems.

Mature students and Irish Higher Education

At 5 per cent, the mature student admission rate in Irish universities is very low, especially when compared to universities in Britain, Europe and the United States. There, depending on what are regarded as full-time and part-time, mature student admissions account for anything from 30 to 50 per cent of all admissions. It is not simply a question of tradition or standards. The crucial difference lies with admissions policy, which is a reflection of college policy itself. For many years, Irish universities have relied almost exclusively on Leaving Certificate points as the main criterion for entry. To date, there has been a lack of acknowledgement, let alone development, of other forms of entry. These revolve around

foundation courses, access courses, and the accreditation of prior learning. There seems to be a determination in the Irish university sector to avoid developing an alternative system of entry for non-traditional students. This means disregarding the special needs and experiences of adult learners, and forcing many of them to sit the Leaving Certificate exam to secure a place in college. This is not the case in Britain, where it has become common practice for third-level institutions to accept a wide array of entry routes (Parry,1997:12). The University of Glasgow, for example, has a multiple entry system, whereby adults can use qualifications from any of the following areas:

- Access schemes
- Collaborations with further education colleges
- GCE (General Certificate of Education, advanced level)
- GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification)
- GSVQ (General Scottish Vocational Qualification)
- HNC (Higher National Credit)
- HND (Higher National Diploma)
- National Certificate
- Open University Credit
- SCOTCAT (Scottish Credit Accumulation and Transfer)
- SCE (Scottish Certificate of Education, higher grade)
- Summer Schools

GCEs and SCEs are traditional routes of entry. The other ten are non-traditional. They are all acceptable routes of entry for mature applicants into the University of Glasgow. If we compare this array of routes to the Irish emphasis on Leaving Certificate points, we witness a stark contrast. Although certainly Britain has experienced demographic changes resulting in a reduction of traditional student numbers, the fact that a university such as Glasgow can operate so many alternative routes of entry for adults, bears testimony to their willingness to open doors for adult learners. Some countries have gone further down the road of making prior knowledge and experience the normal rather than the exceptional route of entry. Sweden was possibly the first country to instigate a national policy for access to higher education based on adult's life, work and educational experiences (Usher,1989:65).

In Britain, there are over 500 recognised access courses. This has led to a wide variety of entry paths to third level education. As Parry notes (1997:20-23),

> ***Not only have many institutions of higher education in England sought to increase the number of entry and transfer points available to students but, as part of larger policies to extend access and encourage flexibility, most have entered into formal partnerships with colleges in the new and enlarged sector of further education.***

Ireland has a small number of unrecognised routes in existence, such as Return to Learning and University Foundation courses. These provide learning opportunities for adults and varying degrees of preparation for university, but none have direct links to third level institutions. The Return to Learning course in UCD is not accepted by the College as an alternative entry route, or given any formal recognition by individual Faculties. In our study, we saw that many people take these courses as preparation for university. Yet there is no guarantee that success in these courses will increase their chances, let alone secure a place on a degree course. This applies to all universities in Ireland. Access and foundation

courses can act as informal gateways, but universities seem unwilling to formalise any arrangement, as this might lead them to becoming an accepted form of entry, thereby securing the rights of mature students.

In essence, formalising and standardising alternative access routes of entry are seen to result in a loss of control by universities over admissions policy. The reluctance of some Faculties to change their policy regarding mature students can be seen as part of a determination to retain their independence. Similarly, at another level, the reluctance of universities to change their policy regarding mature student access, can be seen as part of a determination to retain their independence from government (Hyland,1997).

These concerns over power and control also surface when we examine issues of accessibility, and how user-friendly Irish universities are to mature students. Universities have been slow to adopt adult education methods and philosophies in their curriculum and teaching. The adoption of such philosophies and methods would be an acknowledgement that some teaching methods are inappropriate and perhaps less effective. Instituting a shift from pedagogical to andragogical teaching methods would require changes in existing approaches to teaching. It would have implications for staff development, curriculum design, assessment procedures and course structures. Perhaps even more fundamentally, it would challenge the way knowledge is produced and communicated within the university. This is the potential impact of accepting that students learn best when they have a sense of partnership and control over how they learn.

The Universities Act (1997) has recently mandated the universities to encourage lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education. The notion of lifelong learning, however, could be viewed as the jurisdiction of adult and continuing education centres, rather than an obligation of the university as a whole. For the university to be truly a centre of lifelong learning, it needs to be amenable to the experiences adults bring with them to higher education. It needs to change its perspective to a 'lifelong perspective'. The former Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University of Warwick, Chris Duke, summarises what this perspective would mean for the university.

> ***The lifelong perspective offers a way of critiquing and revising all levels and areas of the curriculum so as to foster a propensity, and willingness to go on learning... . It implies examining the nature of knowledge and the nature of learning more carefully and deliberately than is our wont (1997:66).***

The findings of our report suggest that UCD and Irish universities in general, need to adopt this lifelong perspective if they are serious about catering for the needs of mature students.

Chapter 11

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

In comparison with other Western societies, the number of mature students in third level education in Ireland is very low. It is six times lower than in Britain. There has been little debate or discussion in Irish education about this disparity. It seems to be taken for granted that the disparity is due to a disproportionate number of school leavers. Third level institutions such as UCD are trying to cope with an unprecedented demand for places. Extra school leavers have been taken in without the necessary increase in resources. Universities and colleges are in a constant struggle to maintain numbers and standards. In this situation, it seems to be taken for granted that, realistically, there is little that can be done about issues such as mature students, at least until the school leaving population begins to level off and, eventually, decline.

There is recognition among educational policy makers and planners that the low number of mature students adds to the maintenance of social inequality. We know that a disproportionate number of school-leavers who go to college, come from upper-middle and professional class backgrounds. We know that a disproportionate number of mature students who do not get into college come from middle, and lower middle-class backgrounds. The argument seems to be that we have a responsibility to meet the needs and interests of school leavers, even though they come from advantaged class backgrounds, before we meet the needs of students, mature or otherwise, who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the final analysis, responses to the issue of mature students, have to do with responses to social inequality. There have been a number of policies such as third level grants, the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme, and the abolition of fees, which have helped reduce the level of social inequality. But, at the end of the day, educational policies and institutions are run by upper middle and professional class people, and it is no coincidence that the needs and interests of children from these classes are met prior to those of mature students or children from working class backgrounds. An example of this is the amount of time and resources that a university like UCD devotes to postgraduate students. Students pursuing masters and doctoral degrees are, in comparison with mature applicants, already advantaged through having a primary degree. Yet far more of the university's resources are allocated to meeting their needs and interests than to mature students who have no degree.

A Learning Society?

The lack of participation of mature students in Irish higher education is not just a question of social inequality, it is a reflection of the way we look at and understand education. It is a reflection of how we operate as a learning society. There is a world-wide movement towards the development of lifelong learning. But looking at higher education in Ireland, one realises that we still have a lot to learn about developing such a society. Our approach to higher education reinforces the traditionally held belief that education and learning is something that occurs when you are young. But there is a sharp reality to this belief. The normative belief that going to college is for young people, is strongly reinforced in practice.

If you do not get to go to college when you are young, the chances of you doing so later in life are slim. Moreover, the normative belief is so strong that some of the mature students we talked to in this study felt that were engaging in some kind of deviant behaviour. Adults are systematically and continually excluded from third level education. As a result, most have learnt to exclude themselves. The cycle of exclusion reproduces itself. Many adult learners in Ireland do not consider third level education as an option. For those who do consider it an option, trying to gain entry can be a long, hard, demanding and traumatic experience. Third level education is not something which adults can step in and out of with ease. It may not be deliberate or intentional, nevertheless higher education institutions create sufficient barriers which not only prevent adults going to college, but which make most people not even consider it a possibility.

Education and learning, then, are seen as activities that happen before you settle down, get a job, marry and have children. But what kind of learning society does this reflect? The nature of work and society is changing dramatically. People are now required to reinvent themselves continually. For most, this reinvention takes place through education. To recommend, as the Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education did, that more mature students should be taken into higher education as the school going population declines, is in some respects to reinforce the notion that third level education is not just the preserve, but the right of the young. It is to reinforce the notion that the educational needs of adults can and should only be catered for once the needs of young people are met. But is it fair to say to someone who has worked and paid taxes for twenty years, that the children of middle class and professional couples have more right to third level education than they do? But more important, is it sensible to have a society that makes it so difficult to access third level education, and to obtain educational degrees, diplomas and certificates? Is it sensible to say to adults that the only way in which you can be guaranteed a place in third level education is by going back to second level, sitting the Leaving Certificate examination, and obtaining the necessary points?

For many third level colleges, allowing in a limited number of mature students is simply a small token gesture. Mature students are often seen and treated as anomalies, unfortunates who need a 'second chance' at education. It is a means of drawing attention away from the fact that education in general, and third level education in particular, functions to maintain class advantage from one generation to the next. The acceptance of mature students, like affirmative action to bring in school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds, despite the best intentions, always runs the risk of being seen as a token mechanism, as a means of legitimising the real enterprise of maintaining existing social, economic and political advantage

Beyond the issue of social inequality, there is a more pragmatic, socio-economic argument to be made for doing something to increase the number of mature students in third level education. We live in a society where people are increasingly required to have multiple skills, to perform multiple tasks, to be able to acquire new knowledge, to be flexible and adaptable to different social and working conditions. To meet the challenges of such a society, and to remain competitive internationally, there is growing acceptance of the need to create a type of society that is based around lifelong learning. There is a need, in other words, for people to continually transform and reinvent themselves through informal learning and formal education. But the development of a learning society cannot take place without people having access to educational courses and programmes leading to degrees, diplomas and certificates. The creation of a learning society has to be based on free and easy access to educational opportunities. There is a need to dismantle the barriers that prevent people participating in education. There is a need to create a positive disposition to, and rewards for, participating in education. We cannot create a learning society if education is

associated with élitism, exclusion, hardship and failure. We need to disentangle the intricate links between creating a learning culture, and education being a path towards self-aggrandisement and social mobility.

An Adult University?

Perhaps, then, the most obvious conclusion from this report is that, beyond vague aspirations, there is no real will or determination from the government, to create a lifelong learning society. The issue of widening access to third level education can and will only be addressed when the school-leaving population declines. In such a scenario, there is little will or determination in an institution such as UCD, to do much more for mature students. In a time when majority interests predominate, mature students are seen as a minority whose rights, needs and interests cannot be met in existing circumstances. In any case, it is strenuously argued with considerable merit, that the College has done more than enough through developing the BA Modular degree for part-time mature students. There is a feeling that UCD is not in a position to offer more places to full-time mature students. In this view, UCD is the largest and one of the most well-known and prestigious universities in Ireland. It should be left to other colleges and universities to respond to and cater for the needs and interests of mature students. In other words, the College has other demands and briefs to fulfil at present, and there will be plenty of time to adapt to the decline in the school-leaving population as the situation arises.

But this is not to say that there is nothing that can or needs to be done. One of the main findings of this study is that there is huge demand by mature students for a small number of places. We found considerable confusion, frustration and anger about the way applications are processed. Here UCD policy seems to fall between two stools. There is a procedure whereby students are admitted on the grounds of mature years, but since there is no guarantee of securing a place through prior learning or experience, applicants are encouraged to follow the traditional route of obtaining the necessary points in the Leaving Certificate. This is about as appropriate as telling an adult who cannot read that they should go back to primary school. On the other hand, those who do apply on the basis of prior learning and experience have no idea what is required in order to be successful. If it were announced clearly that applicants would be accepted who had, for example, completed a certain access or foundation course, and had obtained certain standards, this would be seen as giving false guarantees. On the other hand, in the present situation, applicants are confused by assessment criteria, and struggle to discover the rhyme and reason by which people are chosen. There is an urgent need for some sort of advice and guidance service to be established within the College which would provide information about the type of prior learning which is necessary or desirable, and the type of work and social experiences being sought. Such a service might, at least, help avoid a situation where nearly one hundred people applied in 1997 to do medicine and veterinary medicine when no mature applications are considered by these Faculties. The establishment of such a service could usefully be part of a broader overall College policy to examine ways of meeting mature student demand, creating standard application assessment procedures, and recognising alternative routes of entry for non-traditional students. Such a service might ease the administrative burden on the Faculty of Arts and enable it to establish a reserve list and offer places refused by those chosen in the first round. It may well be that in the absence of specific criteria regarding prior learning, and the difficulties and costs involved in holding interviews, that the most appropriate solution to awarding places is simply to remove competition as a basis for making decisions. This would mean that all applications would be assessed to see if people are eligible. Those deemed eligible would then enter a lottery for places.

But there are other things which UCD might consider doing. The mainstay of UCD's approach to meeting the needs of mature students is the BA Modular. The attitude appears to be that if mature students want to come to UCD, let them do Arts and let them do it at night. There is much to recommend the BA Modular, particularly its flexibility and the ability of students to set their own pace of learning. Unfortunately, it is seen by some as a second class degree. One way of meeting mature student demand would be to abolish the distinction between the day BA and the BA Modular and have the same courses offered during the day and at night-time. Another way of meeting mature student demand would be to run the 1st year courses of more popular 1st Arts subjects in outreach centres within the greater Dublin area. These are some of the ways in which UCD could play a positive role in increasing access for mature students to its degree courses.

There is another important issue regarding access that has been raised by our findings. There is definite evidence that suggests that access to UCD as a full-time mature student to UCD, is easier for those who are over thirty years old, who received three or more honours in the Leaving Certificate, who have had some previous experience of higher education, and who have had a steady occupation or employment. This, in other words, is how second chance education tends to operate in UCD.

But, as we have seen throughout the report, while increasing access is important, there has also to be some movement towards increasing accessibility. Issues of accessibility for mature students are linked to a broader debate in education that argues that if we are to reduce social inequality we need to move beyond improving educational opportunities to ensuring equality of outcome. There is little point in improving access for mature students if they are going to withdraw or not complete the course. Our findings showed that those who completed their degree were more likely to be women, over thirty years old, with no children, who had three or more honours in the Leaving Certificate, and some experience of higher education.

Increasing accessibility revolves around recognising that coming to university is especially difficult for mature students who have been out of the educational system for some time. They are a small minority. They feel they stand out, yet there is no recognition of their difference or difficulties. They often feel used as the ones who have to answer questions in tutorials. To help ensure that the investment mature students have made in third level education is successful, it is necessary for the College to develop some kind of personal support system. Most mature students succeed as well as traditional school leavers. But there are many who withdraw by the end of first year. UCD would go a long way towards improving accessibility by appointing a personal tutor for each mature student.

The issue of mature students will not be resolved until there is a move away from the belief that school leavers have a greater right to higher education than those who have worked, paid taxes, and served the families and communities in which they live. In an equal and just system of entry to higher education there has to be as much recognition given to a proven interest and commitment to the chosen field and the contribution people have made to the communities in which they live, as there is to proven educational ability.

This is a study of a group of people struggling against the odds to fulfil their dream of a university education. It tells the stories of people who see becoming a mature student in UCD not just as a privilege, but a pleasure. Of course, they complained about policy, practice and resource. But they also want to spread the good news about the wonder and beauty of going to university. And yet they know that they will get a mute response from their friends and colleagues most of whom may feel that they have a better chance of getting into heaven than into UCD.

The issue of mature students in UCD, or any other third level college, will not be resolved unless there is a major revaluation of what it is to be a university. In effect, it is becoming less appropriate for universities to see themselves as producers and guardians of knowledge, and more realistic to see themselves as competitors in an expanding global market. In this respect, we can see UCD as a well-known local producer of good quality degrees, diplomas and certificates. It has operated on the basis of a restricted, niche market, providing its products and services to an élite clientele of school leavers. It believes that clients have to come to its premises in Dublin in order to avail of its services. It is confident that when market conditions change, it will be able to adapt its programmes to meet the needs of mature students regardless of what other competitors may dominate the market in the future. We believe that this is a restricted, socially inequitable and inappropriate view for now, and for the future.

The recent Government Green Paper, *Adult Education in an Era of Lifelong Learning* (1988), noted that proportion of mature students entering full-time third level education in Ireland was much lower than in most other OECD countries and six times lower than in the UK. The Steering Committee's Technical Working Group on the Future Developments of Higher Education (1995) recommended that the proportion of full-time mature students in Irish third level colleges be increased from 5 to 16 per cent by 2010. If these recommendations were to be followed it would lead to a dramatic change in the number of mature students in UCD. But present arrangements concerning mature students present a policy paradox. Fees are paid for full-time day students, but not for part-time Modular BA students. Consequently, whereas night-time courses facilitate access on the basis of time commitments, full-time day courses facilitate access for those who cannot afford to pay fees.

It is unlikely that the class imbalance among mature students can be overcome through increasing the number of part-time Modular BA students. The Green Paper on Adult Education noted that 75 per cent of mature students participate in part-time courses. However, it did not recommend free fees for such courses. Instead it recommended that the present system of tax relief on fees paid be continued. Without free fees and a Back to Education allowance, the Modular BA degree will continue to be primarily the preserve of those who can pay fees. If UCD wishes to fulfil Government recommendations and improve the level of access and accessibility for disadvantaged mature students, it is imperative that the mature student quota be increased dramatically and soon.

Recommendations

1. The annual intake of students into full-time day degree programmes on the grounds of mature years should be set initially, and as soon as possible, at 10 per cent. This is justified on the grounds that mature students have generally made a contribution to society, and that it encourages and promotes lifelong learning. It would also serve as an encouragement to school leavers to take time out from education, to consider their career options, and to re-enter the education system at a later stage. In this respect, it would help ease the pressures associated with the competitive struggle to attain CAO points in the Leaving Certificate. It would mark UCD out as a leader in third level education policy, and enable the College to prepare constructively for the beginning of the next century when there will be a sharp decrease in the number of school leavers.

2. The College should develop an overall College policy regarding mature students which would set specific guidelines and targets for admissions to each Faculty and would establish whatever support, guidance and counselling services are necessary to make UCD more user-friendly for mature students.

3. The College should appoint a cross-faculty Committee to help develop an overall College policy and to monitor the provision of resources and services for mature students.

4. As part of its remit to improve access for mature students, it is recommended that the College establish clear, identifiable, transparent criteria by which applicants on the grounds of mature years are assessed. In this regard, it is crucial that UCD establishes an internationally recognised and accepted system for the accreditation of prior learning.

5. The College should appoint a Mature Student Officer who would be responsible for improving accessibility through dealing with inquiries, overseeing the admission process, and providing whatever guidance and counselling were necessary to current students.

6. The College should examine possibilities of widening access for mature students. This might involve examining the possibility of:

   (a) amalgamating the Modular BA degree with the fulltime day degree.

   (b) extending the provision of certain degree courses, particularly within popular first year subjects, to outreach centres.

   (c) providing its own access course, or developing links with other access course providers, which would result in successful candidates being accepted into degree programmes subject to the availability of places. This may involve either the implementation of a waiting list or a lottery system to allocate places.

7. The College should examine the possibility of introducing a system of intermediate educational awards similar to that operated by the National Council for Educational Awards. Within such a system it would be possible for students to be awarded a college certificate after successfully completing one year, a diploma after two years and, finally, a degree.

8. One of the best methods of improving both access and accessibility for mature students is to introduce a fully modularised system of degree, diploma and certificate courses. As well as easing pressure on restricted resources and space, a fully modularised system enables students to study at their own pace. It is recommended that the Mature Student Committee would work with other relevant committees and personnel in the College to hasten the introduction of a modularised system.

9. The College should examine possibilities of increasing accessibility for mature students. These may include:

   (a) the development of a mature student induction seminar. This would take place prior to the start of the degree programme, and would allow mature students to become familiar with the college, and to meet staff and other mature students.

(b) each mature student being appointed a personal tutor in the first year of their degree programme, as this has been found to be the danger period for mature student withdrawals.

(c) the development of more family-friendly activities on campus — family days, the inclusion of children at conferring ceremonies, and so on.

(d) the improvement of child-care facilities on the campus.

APPENDIX A: IRISH UNIVERSITIES AND MATURE STUDENTS

UNIVERSITY	COURSE	PLACES RESERVED	EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS	OTHER ENTRY REQUIREMENTS	PERSONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM?
Dublin City University (DCU)	Business School, Computing and Mathematical Sciences, Joint Faculty of Humanities, Science and Paramedical Studies, Engineering and Design.	5-10 per cent places reserved	Evidence of ability to pursue and benefit from the program	Interview. In some cases an aptitude test	Yes. There is a personal tutor for each student
National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM)	Arts, Philosophy, Celtic Studies, Science	Approximately 10 per cent reserved for mature students	Evidence of ability to pursue and benefit from the program	CV with 2 references. Usually an interview	A range of specific academic and social supports
Pontifical University, Maynooth	Theology	No specific number. About 10 mature student are presently in each course	Interview selection	CV with 2 references	A range of specific academic and social supports
University College, Cork (UCC)	Arts	Quota system. In 1997, 80 places (40 Social Science	Looked at on an individual basis, with school Leaving results sometimes taken into account	Assessment test	No
	Commerce	Quotas	Same as above		No
	Law	5 places 1997	Same as above	Assessment test	No
	Science	Quotas	Same as above		Yes, personal tutor
	Food Science/Technology	Quotas	Same as above		No
	Engineering	Quotas	Same as above		
	Medicine/Dentistry	Quotas	Same as above	Interview/short list	No

APPENDIX A: IRISH UNIVERSITIES AND MATURE STUDENTS — continued

UNIVERSITY	COURSE	PLACES RESERVED	EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS	OTHER ENTRY REQUIREMENTS	PERSONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM?
National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG)	Arts	70 places	Individually assessed, school Leaving results sometimes taken into account		College Advisory and Counselling Services
	Science	No fixed number. Considered on individual basis	Maths and at least one Science subject desirable		Same as above
	Engineering	No fixed number. Considered on individual basis	Maths and at least one Science subject desirable		Same as above
	Medical	Very limited	Professional qualification	Health care occupation	Same as above
	Commerce	10 places B. Comm by day	Educational attainment in business area	Pass Maths in Leaving Cert. Or equivalent	Same as above
Trinity College Dublin (TCD)	Arts, Business, Economic and Social Studies, Engineering and Systems Sciences, Health Science, Science	Approximately 10 per cent on each course	No specific requirement	Aptitude test and interviews	Yes, each student allocated personal tutor
University of Limerick (UL)	All	Places awarded on merit	No specific requirements accepted on individual basis. Must show ability of benefiting from program	Interview	Yes, each student allocated personal tutor

APPENDIX A: IRISH UNIVERSITIES AND MATURE STUDENTS — continued

UNIVERSITY	COURSE	PLACES RESERVED	EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS	OTHER ENTRY REQUIREMENTS	PERSONAL SUPPORT SYSTEM?
University College Dublin (UCD)	Arts BA Modular	Not limited, depends on quality of applicatnons	Evidence of adequate educational attainment	Commitment to academic achievement	None specifically
	Arts Day	Limited number only for exceptional cases None specifically	Education equivalent to Leaving Cert. Honours or matriculation	Evidence of continuing academic achievement	
	Agriculture	No set number, conditional on quality of application	Evidence of vocational achievement and academic potential	May be interviewed	None specifically
	Engineering	None	Proof of Maths ability	Interview	None specifically
	Social Science	14	Work Experience taken into account		None specifically
	Science	Limited number of places	Demonstrable interest in Science or involvement in Science	Interview	None specifically
	Law	Limited number of places	Leaving Cert. and other exams and work experience taken into account	Interview	None specifically
	Commerce	None reserved	Proof of Maths ability	Sometimes interview	None specifically

Adapted from: Department of Education (1998) Guide for Mature Students.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGY

Sources of Data: This report is a summary of our study of mature students in UCD. It contains findings on five different groups of mature students:

- Unsuccessful applicants
- Full-time mature students
- Mature graduates
- Modular BA students
- Mature students who withdrew

Two main sources of data were used to complete this study:
1. Questionnaires; 2. Focus groups.

We also collected statistical information from the Admissions Office in UCD. This provided the basis for our samples. Personal interviews were conducted with three Faculty Deans, and phone interviews were conducted with 5 mature respondents who had withdrawn.

Sampling: We designed a stratified sample to gather information on each of the five groups. From data supplied by the Admissions Office, we were able to locate the populations of full-time mature students, mature graduates, and mature withdrawals. The Admissions Office also provided a random sample of unsuccessful applicants and of students registered on the BA Modular programme. Our stratified sample broke down as follows:

Unsuccessful applicants	200
Full-time mature students	98
Mature graduates	95
Modular BA students	100
Students who withdrew	61
Total	**554**

Sampling frame: It is the policy of the admissions office to protect the confidentiality of students in UCD. We were not given access to their names and addresses. Questionnaires were sent through the Admissions Office. The Office provided the address labels for each of the five samples. The labels were attached to the envelopes in the office to protect confidentiality.

Collection of survey data: We designed five different questionnaires to send to the five groups. These were mailed in November 1997. This produced a response rate which was below 40 per cent overall. In January, we sent questionnaires to mature students who did not respond the first time. This provided an overall response rate of 50 per cent. A breakdown of this figure is detailed below.

Groups	Response	Total	Per cent
Unsuccessful applicants	74	200	37%
Full-time mature students	62	98	63%
Mature graduates	54	95	57%
Modular BA students	62	100	62%
Students who withdrew	24	61	39%
Total	**276**	**554**	**50%**

Collection of qualitative data: We conducted 6 focus groups with mature students in order to understand their experiences in UCD. On the questionnaire, people were asked to indicate if they would take part in a focus group. Those who indicated their availability were contacted on a random basis. 38 people participated. These groups took place in UCD and in a Dublin Hotel, and were between 1-2 hours in duration. The focus groups were tape-recorded. Participants wore name badges so that they could be identified during the transcription stage.

Five mature students who withdrew were interviewed over the phone. A focus group was unsuitable due to the small numbers and the difficulties in gathering participants in one place. We also interviewed the Deans of the Faculty of Arts, Philosophy and Sociology, and Science.

References

Baines, G. (1986) *On Course for the Future: The Experience of Mature Students During and Beyond the Degree*. Central and West London Open College.

Baker, T. and Veléz, W. (1996) 'Access to and Opportunity in Post-Secondary Education in the United States: An Overview,' *Sociology of Education*, Extra Issue, 82-101.

Bassett, M., Brady, B., Inglis, T. and Fleming, T. (1989) *For Adults Only: A case for Adult Education in Ireland*. Dublin: AONTAS.

Bourner, T. (1991) *Part-Time Students and Their Experience of Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Bryant, R. (1995) 'Why Does Being a Mature Student Have to be so Painful?,' *Adults Learning*, 6, 9, 270-271.

Burkitt, B. (1995)'Black Women Returning to Higher Education: Progression Issues,' *Adults Learning*, 6, 5, 159-161.

Burns, A., Scott, C. and Cooney, G. (1993) 'Career Trajectories of Single and Married Mothers who Complete Tertiary Study as Mature Age Students,' *Education and Society*, 11, 1, 39-50.

Clancy, p. (1982) *Participation in Higher Education: A National Survey*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. (1988) *Who Goes to College?* Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. (1994) 'Expanding Enrolments in Higher Education - Some Trends and Implications,' in *The Role of the University in Society*. Dublin: National University of Ireland.

Clancy, P. (1995a) *Access to College: Patterns of Continuity and Change*. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. (1995b) 'Access Courses as a Way Towards Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities in Participation in Higher Education,' in Higher Education Authority, *Access Courses for Higher Education*. Proceedings of HEA Seminar on Access Courses for Higher Education held on 31 January 1995, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Clancy, P. (1996) 'Pathways to Mass Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland,' *European Journal of Education*, 31, 3, 355-370.

Clancy, P. (1997)'Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland: Participation and Performance,' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51, 1, 86-106.

Cochrane, C. (1991) 'First Year at University: A Study of Mature Female Students,' *The Irish Journal of Education*, 25, 42-51.

Coffield, F. and Williamson, B. (1997) 'The Challenges Facing Higher Education,' in F. Coffield and B. Williamson (Eds) *Repositioning Higher Education*. UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Commission on Higher Education (1984) *Lifelong Learning* (Kenny Report). Dublin: Stationery Office.

Committee on Adult Education (1973) *Adult Education in Ireland* (Murphy Report). Dublin: Stationery Office.

Council of Europe (1970) *Permanent Education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Council of Europe (1996) *Access to Higher Education: Access for Underrepresented Groups. Vol. II Report on Western Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.

Cropley, A. (Ed) (1979) *Lifelong Education: A Stocktaking*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.

Crozier, R. and Garbert-Jones, A. (1996) 'Finding a Voice: Shyness in Mature Students' Experience of University,' *Adults Learning*, 195-198.

Dearing, R. (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. London: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.

Department of Education (United States) (1994) *The Condition of Education*. Washington D.C.: National Centre for Educational Statistics.

Department of Education (1992) *Education for a Changing World*, Green Paper on Education. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1995) *Charting our Education Future*, White Paper on Education. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Department of Education (1998) *Guide for Mature Students 1998: Entry to Full-time Third Level Courses*. Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education and Science (Britain) (1992) 'Leaving Rates among First Degree Students in English Polytechnics and Colleges,' *Statistical Bulletin, 9/92*, DES.

Duke, C. (1989) 'Creating the Accessible Institution,' in O. Fulton (Ed) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press.

Duke, C. (1997) 'Towards a Lifelong Curriculum,' in F. Coffield and B. Williamson (Eds) *Repositioning Higher Education*. UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Edwards, R. (1990) 'Access and Assets: The Experience of Mature Mother Students in Higher Education,' *Journal of Access Studies*, 5, 2, 188-202.

Edwards, R. (1993) *Mature Women Students: Separating or Connecting Family and Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Egan, O. (Ed) (1994) *Equality of Opportunity in Third Level Education in Ireland*, Proceedings of Forum held in November 1993 in University College Cork. Cork: National Unit on Equal Opportunities at Third Level.

Elsey, B. (1982) 'Mature Students' Experience of University,' *Studies in Adult Education*, 14, 69-77.

European Commission (1995) *Teaching and Learning: Towards a Learning Society*. Brussels: European Commission.

Fleming, T and Murphy, M (1997) *College Knowledge: Power, Policy and the Mature Student Experience at University*. Maynooth: MACE.

Fulton, O. (Ed) (1989) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press.

Gallagher, A., Richards, N. and Locke, N. (1993) *Mature Students in Higher Education: How Institutions can Learn from Experience*. University of East London: Centre for Institutional Studies.

Goodlad, S. (1990) 'Need Mathematics and Science Present a Problem for Access to Universities?,' In G. Parry, and C. Wake (Eds) *Access and Alternative Futures for Higher Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Graham, B. (1989) *Older Graduates and Unemployment*. London: Career Services Trust.

Graham, B. (1991) *Messages from Mature Graduates*. Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services.

Halpin, A. (1997) 'Equalising Opportunities for Students: The NCEA Access Scheme,' in R. Morris, (Ed) *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Hartley, J. and Lapping, C. (1992) 'Do Mature Students of Psychology Perform as Well as Traditional Entry Ones? An Analysis of Archival Data,' *Psychology Teaching Review*, 1, 76-81.

Healey, M. (1998) *Everything to Gain: A Study of the Third Level Allowance Scheme*. Dublin: AONTAS.

Higher Education Authority (1995) *Access Courses for Higher Education*. Proceedings of HEA Seminar on Access Courses for Higher Education held on 31 January 1995, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Dublin: Higher Education Authority.

Hopper, E and Osborne, M. (1975) *Adult Students: Education, Selection and Social Control*. London: Frances Pinter.

Hyland, A. (1997) 'Challenges and Opportunities in Higher Education.' *Paper Delivered at the Annual Conference of University Administrators, held in UCC, 27 March 1997*. Cork: University College Cork.

James, D. (1995) 'Mature Studentship in Higher Education: Beyond a Species Approach,' *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 16, 4, 451-466.

Johnson, C. and Locke, M. (1990) *Experiences and Views of Mature Students*. CIS Working Paper No. 61, Polytechnic of East London.

Johnston, R. and Bailey, R. (1984) *Mature Students and Their Experiences of Full-time and Part-time Higher Education*. Sheffield: PAVIC.

Johnson-Bailey, J. and Cervero, R. (1996) 'An Analysis of the Educational Narratives of Re-entry Black Women,' *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46, 3, 142-157.

Kelly, S. (1987) *The Prize and the Price: The Changing World of Women who Return to Study*. Sydney: Methuen Haynes.

Lucas, S. and Ward, P. (1985) 'Mature Students at Lancaster University,' *Adult Education*, 58, 2, 151-157.

Lynch, K. (1996) 'The Policy Context,' in M. Martin and C. O'Neill (Eds) *A Degree at Last: Stories of Choice, Challenge and Change to Celebrate the European Year of Lifelong Learning*. Dublin: AONTAS.

Lynch, K. (1997) 'A Profile of Mature Students in Higher Education and an Analysis of Equality Issues.' In R. Morris, (Ed) *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

MacDonald, C. and Stratta, E. (1998) 'Academic Work, Gender and Subjectivity: Mature Non-standard Entrants in Higher Education,' *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 30, 1, 67-79.

McGivney, V. (1990) *Education's for Other People: Access to Education for Non-participant Adults*. Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education.

McGivney, V. (1996) *Staying or Leaving the Course: Non-Completion and Retention of Mature Students in Further and Higher Education*. Leicester, UK: National Organisation for Adult Learning.

McPherson, A. (1991) 'Widening the Access Argument,' in T. Schuller (Ed) *The Future of Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Martin, M. and O'Neill, C. (1996) *A Degree at Last: Stories of Choice, Challenge and Change to Celebrate the European Year of Lifelong Learning*. Dublin: Aontas.

Maynard, E. and Pearsall, S. (1994) 'What about Male Mature Students? A Comparison of the Experiences of Men and Women Students,' *Journal of Access Studies*, 9, 229-240.

Melling, G. and Stanton, G. (1990) 'Access to and Through Further Education,' in G. Parry and C. Wake (Eds), *Access and Alternative Futures for Higher Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Metcalf, H. (1993) *Non-Traditional Students' Experiences of Higher Education: A Survey of the Literature*. London: Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals.

Metzner, B. and Bean, J. (1987) 'The Estimation of a Conceptual Model of Non-traditional Undergraduate Student Attrition,' *Research in Higher Education*, 27, 15-35.

Mischler, C. (1983) 'Adults' Perceptions of the Benefits of a University Degree,' *Research in Higher Education*, 19, 213-230.

Morgan, D. (1988) *Focus Groups as Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

Morris, R. (Ed) (1997) *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Morriss, R., and McMahon, B. (1998) 'Dismantling the Barriers: Educational Justice and Access in Ireland,' In J. Preece (Ed) *Beyond the Boundaries: Exploring the Potential of Widening Provision in Higher Education*. Leicester: NIACE.

Morrissey, M. (1990) 'Mature Students and Continuing Education in Ireland,' *Irish Journal of Education*, 24, 12-26.

Morrissey, M. and Irvine, D. (1991) 'Part-Time Mature Students in Higher Education: A Case Study,' *Irish Educational Studies*, 10, 1, 244-255.

Moss, W. (1988) *Breaking the Barriers*. ALFA/REPLAN.

NIACE (National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) (1993) *An Adult Higher Education: A Vision*. Leicester: NIACE.

NIACE (1994) *What Price the Learning Society? Results from the MORI Poll Survey*. Leicester: NIACE.

NUCEA, (National University Continuing Education Association) (1996) *Lifelong Learning Trends: A Profile of Continuing Higher Education, 4th Ed*. Washington D.C.: NUCEA.

OECD (1995) *Learning Beyond Schooling: New Forms of Supply and New Demands*. Paris, OECD: Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.

OECD (1997) *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators*. Paris, OECD: Centre for Educational Research.

Osborne, M., Charnley, A. and Withnall, A. (1984) *Review of Existing Research in Adult and Continuing Education, Vol 1: Mature Students*. Leicester: National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education.

Osborne, R. (1996) *Higher Education in Ireland: North and South*. London: Jessey Kingsley.

Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness (1996) Dublin: Government Publications.

Parry, G. (1997) 'Patterns of Participation in Higher Education in England: A Statistical Summary and Commentary,' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51, 1, 6-28.

Parry, G. and Wake, C. (Eds) (1990) *Access and Alternative Futures for Higher Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Pascall, G. and Cox, R. (1993) *Women Returning to Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Phillips, C. (1986) 'Full time Mature Students in Higher Education: A Survey of their Characteristics, Experiences and Expectations,' *British Educational Research Journal*, 12, 289-308.

Preece, J. (Ed) (1998) *Beyond the Boundaries: Exploring the Potential of Widening Provision in Higher Education*. Leicester: NIACE.

Redding, N. and Dowling, W. (1992) 'Rites of Passage Among Women Re-entering Higher Education,' *Adult Education Quarterly*, 42, 4, 221-236.

Richardson, J. (1994) 'Mature Students in Higher Education: I. A Literature Survey on Approaches to Studying,' *Studies in Higher Education*, 19, 305-325.

Richardson, J. (1995) 'Mature Students in Higher Education: II. An Investigation of Approaches to Studying and Academic Performance,' *Studies in Higher Education*, 20, 1, 5-17.

Rickwood, P. (1981) 'Teaching Mature Students to Study,' *Adult Education*, 54, 1, 6-11.

Roderick, G (1981) *Mature Students in Further and Higher Education*. University of Sheffield: Division of Continuing Education.

Schuller, T. (Ed) (1991) *The Future of Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Scott, C., Burns, A. and Cooney, G. (1996) 'Reasons for Discontinuing Study: The Case of Mature Age Female Students with Children,' *Higher Education*, 31, 233-253.

Scott, P. (1991) 'Access: An Overview,' in T. Schuller (Ed) *The Future of Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Skager, R. (1978) *Lifelong Education and Evaluation Practice*. Hamburg: UNESCO Institute for Education.

Smithers, A. and Griffin, A. (1986) *The Progress of Mature Students*. Manchester: Joint Matriculation Board.

Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995) *Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education*. Dublin: HEA.

Tarsh, J. (1989) 'New Graduate Destinations By Age at Graduation,' *Employment Gazette*, 97, 581-98.

Thames Polytechnic (1991) *Mature Students at Thames Polytechnic: Market Research Findings*. PR Unit: Greenwich University.

Tinto, V. (1975) 'Drop-out from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research,' *Review of Education Research*, 45, 89-125.

Tuckett, A. (1990) 'A Higher Education System fit for Adult Learners,' in G. Parry and C. Wake (Eds) *Access and Alternative Futures for Higher Education*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Usher, R. (1989) 'Qualifications, Paradigms and Experiential Learning in Higher Education,' in O. Fulton (Ed) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press.

Wakeford, N. (1994) 'Becoming a Mature Student: The Social Risks of Identification,' *Journal of Access Studies*, 9, 241-256.

Walters, M. (1997) 'Mature Students - Overcoming the Barriers to Higher Education,' in R. Morris (Ed) *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Weil, S. (1986) 'Non-Traditional Learners Within Traditional Higher Education Institutions: Discovery and Disappointment,' *Studies in Higher Education*, 11, 3, 219-235.

Weil, S. (1988) 'From a Language of Observation to a Language of Experience: Studying the Perspectives of Adults in Higher Education,' *Journal of Access Studies*, 1988, 13, 1, 17-43.

Weil, S. (1989) 'Access: Towards Education or Miseducation? Adults Imagine the Future,' in O. Fulton (Ed) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE/Open University Press.

West, L., Hore, T. Bennie, C., Browne, P. and Kermond, B. (1986) *Students Withdrawing from Full-time Education*. Monash University: Higher Education Advisory and Research Unit.

West, L., Hore, T., Eaton, E. and Kenneard, B. (1986) *The Impact of Higher Education on Mature Age Students*. Monash University: Higher Education Advisory and Research Unit.

Williams, J. (Ed) (1997) *Negotiating Access to Higher Education: The Discourse of Selectivity and Equity*. UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Williamson, B. and Coffield, F. (1997) 'Repositioning Higher Education,' in F. Coffield and B. Williamson (Eds) *Repositioning Higher Education*. UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Woodley, A., Wagner, L., Slowey, M., Hamilton, M. and Fulton, O. (1987) *Choosing to Learn: Adults in Education*. Milton Keynes, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Woodley, A (1984) 'The Older the Better? A Study of Mature Student Performance in British Universities,' *Research in Education*, 32, 35-50.

Woodley, A. (1991) 'Access to What? - A Study of Mature Graduate Outcomes,' *Higher Education Quarterly*, 45, 1, 91-108.

Woodley, A. (1995) 'The Experience of Older Graduates from the British Open University,' *International Journal of University Adult Education*, 34, 1, 37-48.

Wray, D. (1996) 'Should Higher Education for Adults Carry a Health Warning for Their Relationships?,' *Proceedings of SCUTREA Conference, Sheffield, 1996*. Sheffield: SCUTREA.

Wright, P. (1989) 'Putting Learning at the Centre of Higher Education,' in O. Fulton (Ed) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press.

Wright, P. (1991) 'Access or Accessibility?,' *Journal of Access Studies*, 6, 1, 6-15.

Yates, J. and Davies, P. (1986) *The Progress and Performance of Former Access Students in Higher Education 1984-1986: Final Report*. Roehampton Institute.

A major change is taking place in Western society. People are beginning to realise that education is no longer something which happens when you are young. Learning has become a lifelong activity. There has been a large increase in the number of adults who want to go to College. They want to obtain the same degrees, diplomas or certificates available to school leavers. In the United States and Europe between a third and a half of the people going to College are mature students.

Each year, up to one thousand three hundred adults apply to study full-time in UCD. Less than 6 per cent, or one in seventeen, are accepted. It is not that UCD wants to turn these students away. It is widely accepted that mature students make an important contribution to the university. The reality is that, unlike in other countries, there is still a high demand and enormous competition among school leavers for third-level places. The traditional argument is that without a dramatic increase in resources, there is simply no room for adults.

This report investigates the story behind the reality of there being no room for adults in UCD. Inglis and Murphy carried out a detailed survey of mature students in the college. Who applies to become a mature student in UCD? What do they do to increase their chances of being accepted? Who gets in? What is it like to be a mature student in a university dominated by school leavers? How does the situation in UCD compare to other third-level colleges in Ireland and abroad? What can UCD do to improve the situation? These are some of the important questions that this report addresses and seeks to answer.

http://ericacve.org/repro1

CE078947

U.S. Department of Education

Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Reproduction Release Form

For each document submitted, ERIC is required to obtain a signed reproduction release form indicating whether or not ERIC may reproduce the document. A copy of the release form appears below or you may obtain a form from the Clearinghouse. Please mail two copies of your document with a completed release form to:

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Acquisitions Coordinator

1900 Kenny Road

Columbus, OH 43210-1090

If you have any questions about submitting documents to ERIC, please call 1-800-848-4815, ext 47642 or e-mail <chambers.2@osu.edu>.

ERIC REPRODUCTION RELEASE FORM

I. Document Identification

Title: No Room for Adults? A Study of Mature Students in University College Dublin

Author(s): Tom Inglis, Mark Murphy

Date of Publication: 1999

II. Reproduction Release

A. Timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community are announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE). Documents are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document. If reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

Level 1

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Zip Code:

Telephone No: (01) 708 4587

Fax: +353 1 628 9370

E-mail: Markfm@yahoo.com

Date: 5 August 1999.

III. Document Availability Information

(Non-ERIC Source)

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor: Adult Education Office

Address: University College Dublin, Belfield Dublin 4, Ireland

Price Per Copy: £10 (Irish Punts)

Quantity Price:

IV. Referral to Copyright/Reproduction Rights Holder

If the right to grant this reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

Zip Code:

(9/97)

Level 2A

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Level 2B

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY:

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Note: The above lines do **NOT** have to be signed by the person submitting the document. A signature is required below to place the document in the database if it is accepted.

B. If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following three options and sign the release.

Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic) *and* paper copy **(Level 1)**. ✓

Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche and in electronic media for ERIC archival collection subscribers only **(Level 2A)**.

Permitting reproduction and dissemination in microfiche only**(Level 2B)**.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but no box is checked, documents will be processed at **Level 1**.

C. "I hereby grant to the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) nonexclusive permission to reproduce and disseminate this document as indicated. Reproduction from the ERIC microfiche or electronic media by persons other that ERIC employees and its system contractors requires permission from the copyright holder. Exception is made for nonprofit reproduction by libraries and other service agencies to satisfy information needs of educators in response to discrete inquires."

Name: Mark Murphy

Signature: Mark Mrf

Organization: Centre for Adult education, NUI, Maynooth

Position: Researcher

Address: Education House
National University of Ireland, Maynooth